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NAT. THE TRAPPER

NAT. THE TRAPPER

AND INDIAN-FIGHTER.

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NAT, THE TRAPPER.

CHAPTER I.

THE LEDGE.

TOWARD noon of a pleasant June day, 18—, a man, mounted on a powerful animal of the mustang breed, was riding slowly over the plain, some distance south-east of the great South Pass.

His appearance was striking. In height he was rather more than six feet, his legs and arms being long and lank in the extreme. His eyes were small, gray and piercing, and remarkably deep-set; his face rather thin and cadaverous, the lower part being covered with a scanty growth of grizzled beard. Add to these not very handsome features a wide, though good-natured looking mouth, and a nose of extraordinary length, and he presented a startling, not to say ludicrous, appearance.

He was dressed in a suit of dun-colored deer-skin; and a close-fitting coon-skin cap, from which dangled the tail, covered his head. A long rifle, which evidently had seen considerable service, rested across the saddle-bow, and a large buckhorn-handled knife peeped from the folds of his hunting-shirt. A powder-horn slung at one side, and a small tomahawk stuck in his belt, completed his outfit.

Such was the appearance of Nathan Rogers, well known throughout that region as Wild Nat, trapper and Indian-fighter.

As he rode slowly along, his eyes bent on the ground, a superficial observer would have pronounced him in a deep reverie; but, from the suspicious glance which he frequently threw about him, it was evident that he was on the look-out for any danger that might be near.

"Gittin' purty near noon," he said, at last, speaking aloud, as was his habit when alone—"purty near noon, an' I sw'ar I'm gittin' e'ena'most famished. I shall be a mere skileton, purty shortly, ef I don't git a leetle something in the provender line. Guess I'll make fur thet clump of timber, an' brile a slice of antelope."

He raised himself in his stirrups, and swept the plain with swift, piercing glances.

"Nothin' in sight," he muttered, dropping to his seat. "Nary an Injun tew be seen. Gittin' mighty quiet, lately; hain't seen one of the pesky critters in a week. Git up, Rocky."

He turned his horse toward a small clump of trees about half a mile distant, and rode rapidly forward. As he neared the grove, his former appearance of carelessness gave place to one of intense watchfulness. His keen gray eyes roved restlessly along the edge of the timber; his movements were slow and wary—every motion being instinct with a caution that long habit had made second nature. When at the edge of the grove, he stopped to listen, rising once more in his stirrups to look about him.

"Nary livin' thing here 'cept me an' the squirrels," he muttered, after a protracted survey of the premises. "So, Rocky," with a pat on his horse's head, "we'll stop, an' have a bite."

He slipped to the ground, unfastened the saddle-girth, and left the horse to graze, and then, placing his rifle close at hand, built a fire beside a fallen trunk, and proceeded to cut some slices of meat, a large piece of which hung at his saddle-bow, and place them to broil on the coals.

He had nearly finished his repast, when he suddenly sprung to his feet, grasped his rifle, and turned, in an attitude of defense, toward the south. His quick ear had caught the sound of danger.

He stood for some minutes, rifle in hand, peering into the green, tangled woods before him, and listening intently. No sound met his ear save the gentle rustling of the leaves overhead, and the occasional note of some familiar wood-bird.

"I don't like this silence," he muttered, glancing uneasily around. "I'm sure that I heard suthin', an' silence in sich cases, ain't a good symptom."

He shifted his rifle to the other hand, and still keeping his eyes fixed on the thicket before him, began moving that way, making a wide *detour*, however, to accomplish his purpose.

As he was creeping noiselessly forward, a slight sound met his ear, and turning his head, he saw, above the top of a huge log, the hideously-painted face of an Indian. Springing to his feet, he was about to make a more decided movement, when a horrible chorus of yells filled the air, and instantly, from every side, save directly behind him, sprung a score of savages.

"Gallinippers!" ejaculated the trapper, "here's a scrimmage on hand."

He instantly raised his rifle and discharged both barrels into the painted host that was rapidly rushing upon him, and then turning, darted away, intending to reach his steed and make his escape. On reaching the spot, closely followed by his pursuers, he discovered that his horse was in the hands of a number of Indians, who had reached the place under cover of the timber.

He was now completely surrounded by the savages, who were pressing forward, eager to capture him. To the right, left and rear were the woods; before him the plain; on every side, the Indians. With a comprehensive glance at the case, the trapper came to a halt, turned toward the nearest of his foes, and swinging his rifle over his head, with a yell that would have shamed a Comanche warrior's best effort, dashed forward. With one blow he felled a gigantic brave who stood before him; another, and a second went down; and then, as the panic-stricken rank broke, leaving a slight opening, he sprung through and darted away to the right, closely followed by the Indians, yelling at the top of their voices.

On he ran, over fallen trees and under branches, and close behind came his pursuers, straining every nerve to overtake him. So close were they, that the fleeing hunter had no opportunity to look for danger ahead, and before he was aware he ran directly into a small band of the enemy, who were evidently lying in ambush.

With shouts of triumph, the Indians gathered round, taunting him with his coming fate.

"The Long-knife shall die," shouted a pompous chief, with

a towering head-dress of eagle-feathers. "He will kill no more braves."

"That remains tew be seen, ole smut-face," retorted the trapper. "I 'spect ter hev the pleasure of scalpin' ye yit."

The Indian glared at him with a look of ferocity and rage, which was intensified by the cool, mocking smile with which the prisoner regarded him.

"What yer goin' ter do with me?" asked Wild Nat, as he saw them preparing to move.

"Long-knife will see. He shall die," was the reply.

He was placed on a horse, his hands tied behind him, his feet lashed together, and surrounded by his captors on every side. The Indians then began moving away to the west.

"Blast it all," growled the trapper to himself, "this is a purty fix tew be in. I'd like tew know how in thunder they got so clus 'ithout my seein' 'em. I know they wasn't—hello! that explains it!"

The incensed trapper gazed about in bewilderment. Directly on the left was a narrow, swale-like hollow, which was completely concealed by the tall grass of the plain, until directly upon it.

"Thar's whar ye skulked, is it, ole leather-chops?" he exclaimed. "Thought ye's smart, didn't yer? I'd like tew snatch ye all bald-headed."

"How in thunder did it happen that I never see that place afore?" he continued to himself. "I sw'ar, I thought I'd tramped over every inch of plain about here. No use in growlin'; but if I ever git away, I'll bet they'll wish they'd died when they war young!"

The Indians traveled steadily forward, and about the middle of the afternoon, reached a high cliff in the Rocky Mountains, at the base of which they halted, and began making some preparations that puzzled Wild Nat considerably. He was not long kept in doubt as to their intentions.

The cliff shot up perpendicularly, a distance of about ninety feet, facing the east. The whole face was smooth, without niche or seam, with the exception of one spot. This was a narrow, shelf-like ledge, about thirty feet from the top, some three yards in length and about one in breadth.

As the trapper was looking at the precipice, with which

he was quite familiar, the pompous chief before mentioned accosted him :

"Does Long-knife behold? The ledge shall be his grave! He will thirst, but there will be no water; he will hunger, but there will be no food. Below him, the birds will fly, the antelope will jump, and the buffalo graze, but it will be nothing to him. Long-knife will not be able to reach them!"

Wild Nat looked at him, at first puzzled; but, as the full meaning of his words broke upon him, his heart sunk. It would, indeed, be a fearful death!

But not to his captors would he show fear.

"Kalkerlate tew set me up thar, eh?" he inquired, in so cool a tone that the chief stared. "Be a splendid place to take a look at the country. Guess I'll make a map on't while I'm thar."

"Long-knife sneers," said the Indian. "He will soon see that the Wolf speaks truth."

"How ye goin' tew h'ist me up thar?" queried Wild Nat.

"The Wolf has means," replied the chief, walking away.

The chiefs now gathered together and held a short council. At its close, the trapper was taken from his horse and placed upon the ground, where he was tied in such a manner as enabled him to stand upright. He was then taken by several Indians and half-dragged, half-driven, up the mountain to the brow of the cliff.

Here, amidst the uproarious and triumphant shouts of his captors, a stout rope of buffalo-hide was produced, and preparations made for lowering the prisoner to the ledge.

Wild Nat looked on with grim stoicism. Well he knew the uselessness of expecting mercy at their hands. For years he had been a scourge among them, and though several times a prisoner, he had always managed to make his escape. His hatred of the Indians was intense; his vengeance unflinching.

After an uproarious tumult, the Wolf stepped forward and tied the buffalo-skin rope about his own waist. His companions then lowered him to the ledge, where he unfastened the rope, and it was drawn up. The trapper was then taken up, his bonds tightened and the rope tied about him, and, amid a hideous yelling, was swung off the cliff.

He landed at last on the ledge where the Wolf stood waiting. He detached the rope, and once more it was drawn up. The trapper's weapons were next lowered, and the Wolf placed the tomahawk and knife in the prisoner's belt and leaned the rifle against the rock, regarding him, meanwhile, with a mocking smile.

"Long-knife has his weapons," he said; "he can shoot the antelope beneath him."

"Blast ye, who cares?" retorted Wild Nat. "Think yer'll tanterlize me, I s'pose, leavin' 'em here; but yer won't."

"The Long-knife has killed his last warrior," continued the Indian, exultingly. "He will take no more scalps. Long-knife is conquered; his carcass will be food for the vultures, and his bones will bleach in the suns of a hundred years."

He fastened the rope about his waist, the trapper looking on in silence, and mentally cursing his fate.

"Ef I war only loose, I'd topple ye over," he muttered. "I'll bet thar ain't a bird livin' thet would dirty his bill with ye, ef ye war dead forty times."

The Wolf gave the signal, and was slowly drawn up. The Indians then went to the plain below, where, in full view of the trapper, they executed their war-dance, and exulted savagely for the space of an hour, at the end of which time they mounted their horses and rode away.

The trapper was alone.

He watched them as they gradually disappeared in the gathering gloom, and then looked at his narrow prison. What a place to meet death in! What a fearful death, to die of starvation and thirst! But the trapper had no weak spot in his nature and was not likely to give way to despair.

As soon as the Indians were fairly gone, he began trying to free himself. In vain he struggled and writhed; the ligatures were too securely fastened. Pausing, at last, from sheer exhaustion, he looked about for means to accomplish his purpose. His hands were tied behind him, so that the knife in his belt was wholly useless. As he speculated, his eye chanced to rest on a single slender edge of rock, projecting from the wall. To this he speedily wriggled himself, and though

from the extreme narrowness of the ledge, he was in danger of falling, he placed his hands against it and drew the bonds back and forth across it, until they snapped asunder. It required a great length of time to accomplish this, but Wild Nat had no lack of patience, and he persevered. His hands once free, it was only a moment's work to cut the other bonds, and in a short time he stood upon the ledge free, at least to move as far as its narrow limits would permit.

But that availed him little, comparatively. In that vast wilderness there was scarcely a possibility of human aid, and he was powerless to help himself.

The narrow ledge was likely to prove his sepulcher.

CHAPTER II.

A WILD CHASE.

THE sun was just visible above the burnished peaks of the Rocky Mountains, and its slanting rays rested like a halo on the tops of the trees forming a pleasant grove near the Sweet-water river.

The river, meandering along between its verdant banks, shone and sparkled like burnished silver, and rippled and chattered to itself, as if it felt the exhilarating influence of the quiet breeze and pleasant scene.

In the edge of the grove above mentioned, an emigrant-train was preparing its night-camp. The scene was a merry and exciting one. Children ran laughing and shouting in every direction; groups of women chatted in cheerful voices around fires, or strolled in couples under the trees; men, in knots of two or three, laughed, jested, and told "yarns;" here a boy was trailing a dog, and yonder a woman perched on a wagon-tongue, with arms akimbo, and laughing, eager face, surrounded with young girls, whose sudden bursts of shrill mirth woke the slumbering echoes of the grove and river.

A little apart from the busy scene stood two men, whom we wish more particularly to introduce to the reader.

The first was an intelligent, manly-looking fellow of about twenty-three years. His cap covered a profusion of brown hair, brushed carelessly back from his forehead, a slight mustache covered his upper lip, and half shaded his firm, frank mouth.

For the past few minutes, he had been intently watching a small moving speck away to the west, and now, turning his fine gray eyes upon his companion, he called his attention to the same.

The man turned about, and drawing his form to its full height, took a sweeping view of the valley. As he stood thus, he presented a splendid picture of a free trapper.

Medium sized, with square shoulders, straight as a young pine and as lithe, he was evidently a full match for any one. His fringed frock of untanned buck-skin was belted tightly about his waist, in which stuck a blackhorn-handled knife, and a small, handsomely finished tomahawk. A powder-horn and a six-shooter hung at his side, and he carried a long rifle, that had evidently seen considerable service.

After a moment's keen scrutiny, he turned to the young man, with a broad grin illuminating his rough features, and said:

"That's a small herd of bufler. They're comin' this way, an' we'll have a few shots at 'em. Not much time tew be lost, either. Let's tew horse!"

The word spread through camp like wildfire, and long before the stampeded herd came near, the men were mounted and ready for them. Hearing the unusual noise throughout the camp, a couple of girls came hurriedly from the edge of the grove, where they had been strolling around, with faces full of alarm and apprehension.

The tallest one, a pretty, slender maid, with dark eyes and floating black curls, whose name was Marion Verne, ran up to the old trapper before mentioned, and exclaimed:

"What is the matter, Vic? Have the Indians come?"

"Nary an Injun," replied Vic Potter, springing into his saddle; "only a herd of bufler. We're goin' to have a few shots at 'em. Ready, Kent?"

The young man replied in the affirmative, and as the herd was yet some distance off, he walked his horse to

the trapper's side, and stood talking with him and Marion Verne.

The herd came on grandly. It numbered only three or four hundred, and was passing to the right of the camp, at the distance of half a mile. As the first of the herd came opposite, Vic Potter gave the signal, and the half-dozen mounted men dashed toward them.

There was no evidence in the herd that they were seen or noticed until they were very close, when some agitation in the outskirts, and running to and fro, showed they were discovered.

The hunters rode steadily abreast until within about twenty-five yards of the herd, when they separated and broke into it.

Vic Potter selected a large cow, and brought her down at the first shot. Leaving her, he dashed after an old bull, which showed symptoms of flight, and charged his horse several times. He succeeded, after considerable trouble and several shots, in bringing him to the ground.

Meantime the herd had passed on, leaving an immense cloud of dust, and the hunters were preparing to cut up such of the game as they desired. Vic Potter tied his horse to the horns of the cow he had secured, and then looked around for his companions. All were near except Wayne Kent. The trapper raised himself and gazed earnestly down the valley.

Far away toward the south east he descried a small, moving object. One whose eyes were less keen would never have seen it. **The trapper shook his head at the sight.**

"The boy's chasin' a buffler, an' he's lettin' his excitement run away with his reason. Don't he see that the sun is down, an' he's plump tew miles from camp, an' goin' like mad? He's a new hand on the plains, an' don't know nothin' about Injun ways. Like as not they'll gobble him up."

Muttering away, the hunter continued to watch the fast-receding figure, until distance, and the fast-gathering dusk, hid it from view.

Then, after securing the choicest portions of the cow, he returned with the others to the camp.

"Where is Kent?" was the question that greeted them on their arrival.

"He's off chasin' a buffler, an' I'm thinkin' he'll git inter-

trouble, tew," replied Potter, throwing down his load. It was now dark, and considerable anxiety was felt for the young man. Among the ones most interested was Marion Verne, though she said nothing, and was, to all appearances, indifferent as to whether Wayne Kent was there or in Nova Zembla. Such is the hypocrisy of the fair!

Meanwhile, the dashing young hunter *was* getting into trouble.

He had singled out a huge bull, on entering the chase, and fired several shots at him. But the animal seemed possessed of a charmed life, and led him a wild chase.

Excited by the sport, and eager to bring the noble animal down, he followed him until the rapidly-gathering darkness warned him to stop. Relinquishing his pursuit with reluctance, he pulled up his horse, and stopped to look about him.

To his utter dismay, he found himself completely out of sight of camp, and, as the sun was down, he was without a guide. He did not stop to consider long, as it was already so dark that objects were distinguishable only at a short distance, but headed his horse in the direction he supposed the camp to be, and pushed forward rapidly.

The night proved to be a dark, cloudy one, so that he was without the stars for a guide, and utterly at a loss. He wandered about, searching vainly for the welcome light of the emigrant camp-fires, until nearly morning, when, wearied with the unavailing search, he threw himself on the ground, and securing his horse to a tree near, soon fell asleep.

He had slept about an hour, he judged, when he was awakened suddenly, in that strange way that probably every one has experienced at some period during his life, namely, that of feeling as if there was some one present, though he heard nothing. Listening attentively, he soon heard the low whinny of his horse. Raising himself to a sitting posture, he listened again, and soon it was repeated, this time lower than before. Rising silently, he went to the horse, and putting his hand on his neck, whispered:

"What is the matter, Bayard? Danger?"

The animal replied with an inaudible whinny, then erected his head, and appeared to be listening intently. Following

his example, the young man soon heard the sound of voices at some little distance off and, after assuring himself that they were coming no closer, he whispered to the horse to "be quiet," and glided away in the darkness.

Proceeding noiselessly, and following the sound, he soon saw a sight that made him start. Gathered around a smoldering fire, that flickered faintly on their painted faces, were some twenty-five Indians!

Our hero only waited a moment to count their number, and then left the vicinity as noiselessly as he had come. Proceeding at once to his horse, he untied and mounted him, and was soon once more on the move. He did not know which way he was going, only that it was away from his unpleasant neighbors, who, fortunately for him, had not suspected his presence.

CHAPTER III.

THE FRIEND IN NEED.

"BLARST thar darned painted hides! I wish they'd shot an' skulped me, 'fore they left me in sich a trap as this. Been here tew nights an' one day, an' am like tew be here, an' make this my last restin'-place. I war a fool for ever fallin' inter ther clutches."

It was now the morning of the second day of Wild Nat's enforced rest, and he paced restlessly up and down the narrow limits of his prison, or paused to gaze over the valley below. Frequently a bird skimmed beneath him, or wheeled close to his niche, and then away, as free as the air.

"Ef I only had you," he muttered, watching one of those fleet-winged creatures skimming airily beneath him, "I believe I could eat you, feathers an' all! Blarst the reds, anyhow! S'pose they thought ef they left me my weepens, it would aggravate me, seein' I couldn't use 'em. Wish they'd left me some ammunition. It wouldn't do me any good, though; if I shot forty birds, I couldn't git 'em."

The pleasant June day wore on. Below in the valley the

birds flitted from tree to tree, and squirrels ran chattering over the fallen trunks, or chased each other up and down the cottonwoods, and once a herd of buffalo went tearing down the further corner of the valley, and disappeared behind the woods beyond.

Still scorched by the sun, and pierced with the pangs of hunger, the trapper paced up and down his narrow beat, occasionally pausing and talking to himself. So the time passed until noon, and the tired hunter gave a glance at the sun, muttering:

"Noon again. I've a notion to jump down. But I might as well die here, as tew die jumpin' off, an' die I shall, for all I see. Cass 'em, anyhow! If ever I git out, I'll make 'em wish they'd killed me on the spot. But that's no use talkin' 'bout gittin' out. 'Way off in this wilderness, folks ain't comin' 'long every day, an' I'm dished, that's sartin. I never s'posed I war goin' tew die like a rat in a trap, an'---wuegh!"

The trapper paused abruptly, and strained his eyes to see some object afar in the distance, that had attracted his attention. After watching it a moment, he muttered:

"It's *somebody*, thet's a fact. Like as not, an Indian."

He continued watching him eagerly for a few minutes longer, and then ejaculated:

"Beaver! it's a white man! Whoop! If he war only comin' this way, or rather, if he war only comin' here, for he's got his nose p'inted in this direction; but it's noways likely he'll come near enough for me tew holler tew him. If my gun war only loaded!"

He stood in silence, watching the approaching object—which was now plainly visible as a man on horseback—for some time, and then a shadow crossed his face, as the rider turned his horse in an opposite direction.

"Hel-lo-o!" shouted the trapper. "'Tain't likely he can hear so fur off, but I'll try anyhow. Hel-lo-o!"

The equestrian passed on without seeming to hear.

"Whoop!" screamed Wild Nat, making every sound the human voice can compass. "Who-o-o-p! Hel-l-l-o-o!"

The stranger seemed to hear, for he stopped to listen.

"Hello! Whoop! Hel-l-l-o-o!" yelled the trapper, growing black in the face with his efforts. "He hears!" he ejac-

calated, joyfully, as the stranger turned toward him. "He hears, an' I'm out of this trap!"

The stranger approached to within a few hundred yards of the cliff, and then, not being able to see any one, shouted.

"Up here," answered Wild Nat. "I'm dished, an' would like yer distinguished consideration on the best way tew git out."

The stranger looked up, and after taking a somewhat protracted view of the situation, called out:

"Well, you *are* in a not over-pleasant place. Been there long?"

"Ever since the night before last," returned Nathan. "Can ye lend a feller a helpin' paw?"

"Certainly," replied the other, heartily; "but how is it to be done? Some sort of a rope is needed."

"Sartin," responded the trapper. "Must have one. Don't scarcely think ye can step up here, nor I can't step down. Ye can git a rope an' let it down from above."

"But the rope?" said the other. "If I had an ax I could peel some bark, and make one of that; but—"

"I've got one," interrupted the trapper. "Thar it comes!"

The stranger took the hatchet, and tethering his horse, fell to work with a will. It was a long task, however, and the sun was not far above the mountain-tops when the rope was of sufficient length and stoutness for the purpose required.

"It's done," called out the laborer. "Half an hour longer, and you will be a free man. It will be no small task to climb the mountain."

He took a survey of the cliff, and then, going several hundred yards to the right, began the ascent. It was a tortuous winding, rocky way, and it was some time before he arrived, panting and somewhat exhausted, at the top.

Securing the rope firmly, he let it down.

"Is it long enough?" he called down.

"Plenty. Touches the ground. Hurrah!"

The trapper, lashing his rifle to his back, grasped the rope, and steadying himself, slid slowly to the ground, where he arrived considerably sooner than the stranger, and stood rubbing his newly blistered hands when his deliverer appeared.

"All right?" he exclaimed, with a nod, and giving his rescuers a hitch, took a stride forward and extended his hand.

"Give us yer paw. Ye've got me out of a rather nice situation, an' I'm corrasponden'ly grateful. What mought yer name be, stranger?"

"Wayne Kent," responded the other; "what's yours?"

"Nathan Rogers, more commonly called Wild Nat," replied the trapper; "maybe ye've heard of me."

"I have," replied Kent, "and am glad to be able to offer you assistance. You look tired."

"Tired! Stranger, I don't know the meanin' of the word when I can git any thing tew eat; but, jist at present, I hain't hed a toothful in three days. I'm holler clean tew my boot-heels. Got any thing eatable?"

"Yes; I have a piece of buffalo-hump. I shot one this morning," replied Wayne, disengaging the meat from his saddle, and preparing to cook it.

A fire was soon kindled beside a log, and the meat stewing and sputtering on a stick beside it. The hungry trapper watched it eagerly, and when done, lost no time in disposing of a considerable piece of it.

"Thet was good," he ejaculated, wiping his mouth; "an' now, as it's 'bout sundown, I guess we'd better be lookin' 'round for night-quarters, 'specially as we're in pretty open ground, an' thar may be red-skins about. That grove, half a mile off, is a good place. What ye say?"

"I think we had better go there," responded Wayne. "I wish I could find my friends."

"Yer friends?" said the trapper, inquiringly. "I hain't asked ye how ye come tew be pokin' round here alone. How was it? Ye ain't trappin' alone?"

Kent then went on to relate his adventures, and when he was done, the trapper remarked:

"Wal, they are not fur from the South Pass, by this time. As I hain't got nothin' tew dew, an' no hoss, I don't mind goin' with ye to 'em. We can stay here till airly to-morrow mornin', an' then we can push on an' overtake 'em. Can't really say that I can 'preciate this trampin' 'round on foot. I'll pay them Injuns for takin' my horse an' puttin' me in thet trap. They'll wish they'd died when they war young."

Kent laughed at the trapper's earnest manner and emphatic nods, and said:

"I don't blame you for feeling rather hard toward them about it. It would have been a fearful death, to die of starvation and thirst."

The trapper's face contracted.

"I've had more cause than thet tew feel hard toward the red brutes. I owe 'em a debt, an' for ten years I've been makin' payments on it, an' hain't *begun* yit."

The grove was soon reached, and selecting a suitable spot, the men prepared to encamp for the night.

About nine o'clock a storm came up; the thunder rolled and the lightnings flashed vividly. Torrents of rain came down, and the wind rocked the trees fearfully, sometimes breaking off a limb, and hurling it down in close proximity to our friends, who experienced some discomfort and inconvenience from the raging elements, being without blankets, and obliged to endure the soaking rain.

The storm was of short duration. In an hour the rain had ceased, and a few faint stars struggled through the broken clouds, looking, to the young man's sleepy vision, as the wind-stirred boughs alternately hid and revealed them, like so many erratic fire flies, that danced and gambled among the swaying leaves; but even these were finally lost in slumber.

The morning broke clear and shining. Kent was awakened by a rough shake, and the voice of Nat telling him, "it war time they war trampin'."

Starting up, he saw that it was full daybreak. Rubbing his eyes, he arose and obeyed the trapper's advice to have "a toothful of butter-bump," which he already had cooked.

After eating their breakfast, they started toward the South Pass, Wild Nat saying that the emigrants would probably be there, or near there, so they could find them by night.

"If you only had a horse, we could travel much faster," said Kent, as he mounted. "As it is, we will have to change occasionally."

"I kin keep up with ye, as fast as ye'll care tew go," replied the trapper, striding away.

And he did. His immense strides were laughably grotesque, and his appearance, as his tall, lank figure glided over the ground, was ludicrous in the extreme.

Changing occasionally to take turns in walking, and stop-

ping only long enough for dinner, sundown found them in a small wood near the emigrant-trail, and not far east of the pass.

"If they have gone ahead of us, it will be unfortunate," said Kent, as they wound along through the woods.

"They hain't," said Wild Nat, clambering over a huge log, rather than go round it, as Kent was forced to do, being mounted. "From whar ye said they war when ye left 'em, they hain't more'n got here. Emigrants must allers camp in these woods, ef they git along here anywhar near night, 'cause, ye see, they couldn't git through the pass by night. No danger but what we'll find 'em."

"I dare say they will be surprised to see me, as no doubt they have given me up for lost," said Kent, his thoughts reverting to Marion Verne, and wondering if she would sorrow if she should never see him again.

"Don't doubt it," said Nat. "I rather think— Hark, what's that?"

Both men stopped and listened attentively. The sun was down, and the forest beginning to grow shadowy. At first they could hear nothing, and then suddenly a slight crashing of brush at a little distance drew their attention. For a moment all was still; then they heard the noise again, this time accompanied with the sound of footsteps which rapidly approached, and, in another minute, an unmistakable son of Ham, of the darkest type, came in view, tearing along at a two forty pace, oblivious of them and every thing else, apparently, and muttering away to his familiar spirit, in the very extremity of fear.

"Hello, thar!" shouted Nat, "whar are ye precipitin' yerself tew, at thet rate?"

The darky never looked up, only muttered something unintelligible, and, if possible, increased his gait.

"Hold on, I say," cried the trapper; "what on aith are ye locomotin' so fast for? Jest stop a bit!"

Seeing that the negro made no motion toward halting, the trapper, with a bound, closed the distance between them, and grasped him by the collar.

"What's the matter? What ye runnin' so for? Ye needn't be so all-fired scart; I ain't an Injun, but a full blooded

white man, an' a hancum one, at that. Jist down brakes, an' ease up a leetle on yer speed!"

"Hol—hold on, sah—I mean, let go!" roared the darky. "Dar's more'n ten hundred Injuns back yender, an' dis chile hain't any notion to lose his sculp. It's de solemn fac', sah. O-o-h! dar's one ob de 'ternal cuss-ess now, an' dis chile am a goner!" he cried, catching sight of Kent, who was laughing till he could hardly keep his saddle.

"Nonsense, Scip," said the young man, as soon as he could speak, "don't you know me?"

The darky straightened himself up, and rolling his eyes toward Kent with a laughable look of relief, in which terror yet had a prominent part, ejaculated:

"Am it reely you, sah? Laws, I thort you was an Injun. Anyhow, sah, dar is lots of 'em behind. Mass'r Vic is dar, an' I hain't no sort o' doubt but what he's dewoured long 'go. Hi, dar dey comes!" and the frightened African made a frantic plunge, as the sound of footsteps was heard approaching.

The trapper held him fast, and in an instant Vic Potter strode into the opening. Seeing Kent, he stopped at once, his face expressive of his glad surprise.

"Hello, my boy! I'm mighty glad tew see ye. I war 'beont sartin that the Injuns had done for ye. If yer comrad' thar— Varmints! Is that yer, Nathan Rogers?"

"Wal, I reckon it *are*," replied Nat, loosening his hold of the darky, and advancing with a broad grin; "an' ef that ain't Vic Potter, then skin me for a grizzly! How are ye?"

"Hearty," replied Vic, grasping the extended hand; "did ye ever know Vic tew be any thing else? How do ye come on, arter three years?"

"Smilin' as a May mornin'," replied Nat. "What was it scart this fellar out of his seven senses? Injuns?"

"Wal," said Vic, "I've a notion thar's some 'bout, an' has been for sev'ral days; but we didn't see any thing only some tracks; an' that, on top of a raisin' ha'r story I've jist been gittin' off, started him. Varmints! but he measured sile without wastin' time!"

"I should rather think he did," said Wild Nat, laughing. "Whar's yer camp?"

"'Bout forty rods off," was the reply; "let's turn toes that way. Jist 'tween us, now, I shouldn't wonder if we had a scrimmage 'fore mornin'. *They're round.*"

"Seen any, Vic?" asked Kent.

"No hain't *seen* any, but I've seen signs, which are all the same. I told the train they'd better be cautious, an' not wander off fur, an' keep track of the young ones. They are not fur off, an' I know it."

"I shouldn't wonder ef it war the same ones that sarved me that ongentlemanly trick," said Nat. "Ef it are, an' I git at 'em, they'll wish they'd not made my acquaintance."

"Hark!"

It was the wild, piercing scream of a female, for help, and sounded in the direction of the emigrant-camp.

Twice it was repeated—each time more wild and despairing than before; then all was still.

CHAPTER IV.

LOST MARION.

"INJUNS thar! Come on, boys!" cried Nat, as he dashed away at the top of his speed.

Vic and Kent followed, leaving the quaking Scip behind, and soon arrived at the edge of the wood, in view of the emigrants, who were running hither and thither in the wildest confusion and alarm.

A group of girls stood near, crying hysterically.

"What's up?" cried Wild Nat, bounding into the center of the confused camp.

"The Indians have carried off, Marion!" sobbed one of the girls, while the others huddled together with frightened faces, and fearful glances toward the darkening woods.

"How?" "When?" "Where?" were questions asked, simultaneously, by the excited men, who at length drew from the frightened girls the following facts:

Marion Verne, in company with half a dozen other girls, had been strolling about in the grove, and tempted by the

beauty of the scene, and the lovely and varied flowers that constantly met their view, they had wandered further into the woods than they had intended, or thought they were doing.

Noticing at last, that it was growing dusk, they turned to retrace their steps, when a small band of savages sprung from the bushes, and seizing Marion, who was a little in the rear of the others, disappeared in the woods before the poor girl could hardly comprehend her fearful situation. The other girls ran crying in the direction of camp, and had only just arrived there when the men came up.

It was now deep darkness, and for a moment every one stood irresolute, trying to think what to do. Wild Nat was the first to speak:

"It never'll dew tew stan' here an' think about it," were his first words. "While we're thinkin', the reds are actin', an' ef we stan' here idle long, we'll ran a good chance to be in the gal's place."

"Fact," said Vic Potter; "tharfore, fix yerselves tew welcome the painted devils."

For a while the emigrants worked with a will, and half an hour later every thing was in the best possible shape for defense.

Guards were stationed every few rods, on every side, and Wild Nat took his stand on the side from which the most danger was apprehended.

Vic occupied his time in standing sentinel, and occasionally taking the rounds of the camp, to see that every man was in his place, and every thing as it should be. But the long night wore wearily away, and the morning dawn came, showing the wide prairie and woodland, from which the light was fast dispelling the shadows, but no signs of the dreaded enemy.

"It's about as well for *them* thet they didn't tackle us," said Wild Nat.

"It's about as well for *us*, I guess," said one of the men. "We are only sixty, all told, and there is no doubt hundreds of the Indians."

"Wal," said Nat, shutting one eye and aiming a tobacco-spit directly at the tip of a small dog's tail, "it's jist as well

for *Uzza*, anyhow, for ther'd be 'bout two dozen less 'live an' kickin', at this present speakin', on *any* account merely."

"Do you think you could dispatch that number in *one* fight?" asked Kent, smiling at the trapper's remark.

"I'm equal to an indefinite an' uncalculated number of 'em," responded the trapper, "an' answer in the place of meat-vittals an' drink to 'em. I kalkerlate," he added, squinting along his rifle barrel, and waiting to draw a fine sight on a large eagle overhead - "I kalkerlate that I save about five hundred bufflers every year by removin' thar nateral enemies, which ain't qualified, so to say, to live on any thing but buffler, an' what they git for the hides. That eagle's tew fur off tew shoot, ain't he?"

"Laws!" said Scip, who stood near, listening in wonder to the trapper's words, "did ye ever kill enny Injuns, sah?"

The trapper turned, and drawing his tall, ungainly form to its full height, gazed on the negro in dead silence for a few moments, evidently too much astonished to speak, at this exhibition of ignorance and apparent incredulity.

"Africa," he said, solemnly, after an impressive pause, "did ye ever eat any pertaters?"

"Reckon I hab," said Scip, with a broad grin, "'bout forty bushels a year."

"Wal," continued the trapper, planting his rifle down solemnly, and gesticulating with his left hand, "I reckon that for every pertater ye eat, I hev knocked down, tipped over, dragged out, scalped, mowed, an' otherwise disfiggered, one dozen Injuns. An' I'm good for as menny more."

During this address, Scip stood listening, with the grin on his black face gradually expanding, until, as Vic told him, his "mouth war in danger of runnin' inter his ears," and when the trapper finished speaking, he stood silent for a moment, evidently thinking how to express an opinion without giving offense. At last he broke out with:

"Sah, am dar any Injuns left?"

"Plenty of them," responded Nathan; "they're thicker'n skeeters in August."

"Wal, den," said Scip, after a moment, "I don't b'lieve ye ever killed a dozen for every tater I eat. What did ye do wid dar scalps, jest tell dis chile dat, will ye?"

Vic came up before the trapper had time to reply, and called him away to participate in a council, the result of which was that the train lay by, while twelve of the best men, led by Wild Nat, were to take the trail. After considerable trouble this was found, and traced for about thirty rods, where the captors had evidently joined a party of nearly or quite two hundred. From there the trail was so cleverly covered that when, after going a short distance, it struck a sandy tract, only partially grassed, it broke into three sections, thus baffling pursuit for a rescue.

The men returned to camp, when it was decided that pursuit was simply impossible; and with gloomy forebodings and sad hearts, the emigrant train prepared to move on. During these preparations, Wayne Kent stood a little apart in silence, his usually bright, frank face overclouded and troubled.

Wild Nat stood near, watching the breaking up of the camp, one elbow leaning on the saddle that covered the back of a large mustang, which he had procured from the train, and the other hand holding "Roarer," as he termed his rifle.

When every thing was ready, Vic shook hands with Wild Nat, saying:

"As I didn't engage tew guide the train only jist through the pass, I dare say ye'll see my ugly pieter some time in the course of a month. I'm kalkerlatin' ter trap up this way somewhar."

"Come up on Deep Creek an' ye'll find me," said Wild Nat; "the beaver is so thick thar, thet they cover the ground, an' thar tails lap by a piece. I'm bound for thar, at this present speakin'."

"Will you take me along for company, Nat?" asked Kent, suddenly. "If you want a companion, I will act in that capacity. I have some curiosity to try a trapper's life."

"Take ye along?" said the trapper. "In course! Yer as welcome as the posies, my boy, an' I hain't enny kind o' doubt but what, in time, ye'll git tew know a thing or two about Injuns. All ready tew go?"

"Yes," was the response: "all ready, and waiting."

Bidding the emigrants good by, the two men rode away, and were soon out of sight of the long train of white wagons

left behind. For some time Kent was silent and thoughtful. He was thinking of Marion Verne, and wondering what her fate was. A desire to find, or at least be near her, had led him to stay with Wild Nat, rather than any great love for trapping, though it was curiosity to try life in the wilderness that led him to leave his home in Ohio and join the train. It was there he first saw Marion Verne, an orphan, who, in company with one of her mother's sisters, was going to California. His musings were suddenly brought to an end by Wild Nat exclaiming:

"Thar's suthin' off yender. It's Injuns tew, but they don't see us. I'll snatch 'em bald-headed if they cum close enough."

"The party appears to be a very small one," said Kent, rising in his stirrups to look at the distant object, which was so far off as to look to him like an indistinct mass, which might be buffalo, or Indians, or whites, though Wild Nat declared it was a party of seven Indians.

"My eyes are purty considerable sharp," he said, in answer to Kent's wondering remark, concerning the keenness of his vision. "In fact, I never yit saw the man who could see as fur as I could. Them Injuns are goin' off north. I'd like tew have a chance to sp'ile sev'ral of thar purty pieters. Blarst thar karkasses, anyhow!"

"Nat," said Kent, suddenly, "what makes you feel so bitter a hatred of the Indians?"

"Beavers!" ejaculated the trapper. "I should think I'd hed *reason*. Youmker, ten year ago I hed a little cabin an' a wife an' tew children. I war livin' peaceably an' mindin' my own consarns. One night a band of Injuns come, took me prisoner, an' butchered my wife an' children afore my very eyes. Then they barnt my cabin, an' took me off for torture. I got away the second night, an' left seven dead redskins as part pay. Since then, I've been an Injun-haver, an' I'll lift the head-gear off of every red devil thet I cum acrost."

The trapper relapsed into silence, and spoke no more until they came upon several buffalo, feeding at some distance from the main herd. One of these the old trapper shot, and, after securing a considerable quantity of the meat, they again rode on, and sunset found them near Deep Creek, a small stream

that had its source in the mountains, and after making a winding course for many miles, was finally lost in the Sweetwater river.

Wild Nat halted at a little distance from the stream, among a thick growth of timber.

"Guess we'll stop here. Tied yer hoss an' I'll show ye my den. This ar' 'bout as nice scenery as ye generally find. This stream hurryin' along over the stuns, an' the woods here, an' the mountains up thar—I can't see how any one can like the towns. Give us the wild penuries, an' the woods, an' mountains, an' git away with yer towns an' cities! Here, follow me."

The two men turned back from the stream, and pursued a narrow, deep ravine, extending back toward the mountains that towered above them; the sides of which were covered with luxuriant bushes and wild vines tangled about them, often forming impenetrable thickets.

Among these the men advanced, the trapper leading the way, and neither of them aware of the dark face that looked after them from a thicket of bushes, nor the pair of malignant eyes that followed their movements with such keen scrutiny.

The trapper continued up the ravine the distance of ten rods, and then thrusting aside the thick vines from one side, removed a large stone, revealing a small, dark opening. Into this he crept, hastily calling Kent to follow. The young man obeyed, and in an instant the stone slid into its place, and the twisted vines, relieved of its support, fell down over it, effectually concealing all trace of the opening.

A moment after, the bushes, a few yards off, parted slowly, and the dusky face became visible. For many minutes the glittering eyes gazed about, and then a look of disappointment succeeded the previous one of triumph. After remaining in silence for a short time, the savage cautiously ventured forth. He had lost sight of the men and was trying to regain the lost clue. Stepping carefully forward, he bent down and earnestly examined the ground. But he was foiled; the ground betrayed no print of footsteps. After searching vainly for some time, the baffled Indian turned and strode away, shaking his tomahawk in futile rage at the silent covert behind him.

CHAPTER V.

THE HOLE IN THE HILL.

"Total darkness down here, isn't there?" said Kent, putting out his hand to see how wide the passage was, and finding hard walls within a foot of where he stood.

"Yas," answered Wild Nat; "but that's nothin'. Foller yer nose, an' I'll foller you."

The young man cautiously advanced, feeling his way, and after going some ten paces, suddenly emerged into a cavern—how large it was impossible to tell, owing to the darkness. It was evident, however, that there was somewhere a communication with the outer world, as the air was not stalling or mephitic, as usual in caves, but quite fresh and agreeable.

"Do we stop here?" asked Kent.

"Yas; I'll have a light in about a minnit," replied the trapper, groping about in search of some torchwood, which he soon found and lighted, revealing the size of the cave. It was a small, oval-shaped room, not more than sixteen feet in length, and proportionately narrow. On two sides there was a small recess, beyond which were several openings or chambers communicating with each other by rugged passages, some of which were several rods in length—mere rifts in the rock.

Kent amused himself with looking at the different rooms, while the trapper built a small fire, and went out to take the horses to a more secure place. In one of the chambers adjoining the first cavern was a small pool of clear, cold water on one side, evidently a living spring, for the water ran bubbling over the stones, disappearing on the other side of the cave. The curious Kent followed the passages from one cave to another until he had passed five, and then came to a large hall or room, with which the cavern terminated. After examining these several subterranean wonders as well as the dim light would permit, the explorer returned to the outer room, and sat down to await Wild Nat's return.

It was some time before the trapper returned, and when he

made his appearance his usually long face was considerably elongated.

"What is the matter?" asked his companion, noticing the hunter's looks.

"Wal, sir," said Wild Nat, "jist tew tell the truth in plain langwage, kalkulated for everybody's understandin', thar's an Injun been doggin' our steps. Gallenippers an' centerpedes! I'd like to scratch his bald head!"

Kent smiled, despite his anxiety, at the trapper's manner, and said:

"Dogging our steps, eh? How did you find it out?"

"Found out by virtew of my oppitckles, in course! When I went out I see sign plenty—broken twigs an' misplaced bushes that I knew dogged well we didn't dew, an' then I perceeded tew look about a little, an' on lookin' about I see the catapiller's tracks. Yes, I did."

"Do you think he saw us come in here?" asked Kent.

"Can't say, replied Nat. "Might or mightn't agin. I'm sumwhat afeard he did. But, ef he did, an' I git a chance at him, I'll let a holler cottonwood full of beaver-tails that he'll wish he'd died afore he saw me."

"What will be the consequence if he has seen us?"

"Be down on us with a whole tribe, like harpises and wolf-preachin'; but I'm not goin' tew leave this place jst yet, till I see. When I pre-empt a spot, I generally squat thar for sum time, as I shell on this present occasion, ef nothin' turns up wuss'n a red nigger's noccasin. Let's have a little grub. I'm 'ginnin' tew feel empty as an old sugar-cask."

Seizing the piece of broiled meat, the trapper tore it in twain and tossed his companion half. This being discussed, ere long they relapsed into slumber.

The next morning the two men were out early, setting traps.

"We'd better keep our oppitckles peeled," said Nat, "or we might git sick with lead pills on the stomach. I persume tew say that thar's copper-skins 'round. Jist toss me over that hatchet, will ye?"

When the traps were set, both men proceeded up the stream. As they were passing through a small open spot, they were suddenly surprised by half a dozen Indians, who rushed out at them from the bushes.

"Yahoo!" shouted Wild Nat. "Here's for a scrimmage. Come on, ye yaller-skinned alligators. I'm ekil tew any ten of ye!" and drawing his bowie-knife with his right hand, and his revolver with his left, he plunged at them, striking right and left, and firing at the same time.

Wayne, meantime, was not idle. With his rifle he brought down one of the savages, and then, as the other barrel was empty, he clubbed it, and swinging it about his head dealt blows right and left with terrible fury.

In a moment half the Indians were down, and the remainder, surprised and bewildered by the decision and effect with which they were met, when they had counted on a complete surprise, took to their heels and vanished in a twinkling.

"Purty well done," said the trapper, coolly. "We've un-kivered four greasy nobs, an' the rest, residew, an' remainder has measured sile. He! he! I guess they thought the climate warn't healthy—not a'apted to thar peculiar constitutions, so tew speak. Let's lift ha'r."

"Heavens!" ejaculated Kent, "you are not going to scalp them?"

"I consider I *be!*" returned the trapper. "Wild Nat Rogers ain't the feller tew let 'em off with thar top-knots unmerlested. Kinder mortifies 'em, ye see, tew hev thar ha'r lifted, an' any thin' to morterfy a red nigger, I say."

"Only the savages practice that barbarity," said Kent. "Why are you better than they if you follow their customs?"

"By virtew of bein' born a white man," replied the trapper, proceeding to remove the scalps of the fallen foe, while his companion went aside, not caring to witness the operation.

The scalps the hunter carried to the cave, where he hung them up as "trophies," he said, "an' ter remind him of the scrimmage."

"Well," said Kent, "I'd rather the 'noble red man' should keep away from here. I don't relish the idea of having them discover this cave, and likely enough keep us in here until we starve."

"I should object tew that thing, myself," said the trapper "but, I guess they won't find us. I've ockepied this domicil

for several seasons, an' I hain't been walled in yet. Fact is," said the old hunter, waxing eloquent, "I never was born an' reared for the purpose of bein' killed by an Injun. I've lived in this kentry for a number of years, an' been in some four hundred an' thirty-two scrimmages, reckonin' it by arithmetical progression, an' snatched some half-dozen copper skins bald-headed in each one; an' I'm now goin' on my fifty-tooth year, an' at this present speakin' I'm a whole individual, an' endowed with sartin unallyunable rights, among which is life, liberty, an' the pursuit of Injuns."

This was said while the old trapper proceeded with the manufacture of a pair of moccasins which he "wanted tew fool the reds with. Ye see," he said, cutting away at the leather, "thar's Injuns 'round, an' I want tew scout a bit, an' seem' these moccasin-tracks they'll naterly suppose it's an Injun made the tracks."

Several days passed without any signs of Indians, and the young man was enjoying himself. This wild, free life greatly pleased him. He went and came, with no cares nor duties to hinder or perplex.

One day Wild Nat was busy cleaning his gun, which he averred had been "consarnedly bamboozled in some way. Why, it's a solemn fact, thet yesterday when I shot at thet wild turkey it held fire, an' it's suthin' it never done afore since I got it," he continued, giving the wiper a vicious jerk.

"Well," said Kent, taking up his rifle and examining the priming, "I believe I'll go out a while, and see if I can get a wild turkey. I can't say that I appreciate buffalo-hump as a regular diet."

He shouldered his rifle and started, followed by the trapper's warning words:

"Keep yer eyes open for Injuns, or they might ask ye to taste tomahawk. I don't doubt but they're 'round."

"All right; I will keep a sharp look-out," was answered, as the young man emerged from their retreat in the hill, and started up the ravine.

Passing from the gorge, Kent turned up the creek, which he followed for a considerable distance, and then struck off to the south. From this point there was a beautiful view of the mountains, and the young hunter resolved to explore fur-

ther. Accordingly he shaped his course toward the desired point, and walked briskly for the space of half an hour, paying, meantime, but little heed to Wild Nat's injunction about keeping a look out for Indians. His thoughts were with Marion Verno, and he wandered on abstractedly, till the extreme beauty of the scene before him drew his attention, and he stopped to look about him.

Before, the mountains reared their heads, and at the left a high cliff shot upward, crowned with a few stunted cedars, and draped with a profusion of wild vines. He stood on a slight eminence, which sloped away to the right, terminating in a series of gorges, deep and shadowy, and covered with a thick growth of slender trees, laced and interlaced with brakes and vines, till they were almost impenetrable. Around him huge trees reared their heads, and bushes and vines grew in the wildest confusion, and high in the ether a large bird screamed harshly as it flew slowly over.

As the young man stood silently contemplating the scene, and wondering at the deep silence which pervaded it, he was startled suddenly, by hearing deep, guttural voices near him.

He had barely time to spring aside in the bushes, when, standing precisely where he had stood a moment before, he beheld eight or nine hideously painted savages. Evidently the noise of his retreat had startled them, for they stopped and listened attentively. He scarcely dared to breathe, so close were the savages to him—the nearest one standing not more than six feet distant. He was so situated that he could see the Indians, while they could not see him but, unfortunately in his haste, he had neglected to get his gun concealed, and about six inches of the muzzle protruded from the bushes. He dared not withdraw it, well knowing that the slightest movement would betray him, and with bated breath he stood, hoping they would not discriminate between it and the stems of the bushes.

The hope was a vain one. The Indian nearest him turned his head an instant, and his eyes fell on the unlucky rifle. With a ferocious grunt, he darted forward, followed by the rest. For Wayne there was nothing to do but run, and, firing both barrels at the advancing foe, he turned and fled to

ward one of the gorges before mentioned, the whole pack at his heels.

The young man was an expert runner, but running on open ground was quite a different thing from running in this wilderness, as he soon found. However, he made pretty good progress, scrambling over logs, leaping rocks, and dodging under lodged trees, over stones and dead boughs, "ducking" his head to avoid limbs, and diving through thickets of vines, with a celerity which would have astonished any one new to the business, and utterly impossible, had it not been for the "motive power" behind.

Gradually he found he was distancing his pursuers, though they still were not far behind. Hurrying forward, he scrambled through a tangled thicket, and plunged down a narrow gorge, half filled with bushes, through whose rocky bottom a little stream bubbled, and which terminated in a sort of broken dell, intersected by ravines and gulf-like fissures in every direction. Darting into one of these, he followed it until the sound of pursuit grew faint, and then, panting and exhausted, he sunk down against the rocky bank and drew a long breath. As he sat there, mentally congratulating himself on his escape, and thinking of the discomfiture of his enemies, his musings were suddenly interrupted by a vice-like grip on his arm, and a guttural voice saying, in most execrable English:

"Ugh! White man go with us."

Looking up he found himself surrounded with Indians, painted similarly to the ones he had just left behind.

He was a prisoner!

In an instant the woods rung with the wild whoops of his captors, and directly the Indians who had pursued him arrived, rejoicing at the capture, and brandishing their tomahawks with savage glee. After a short consultation, the white man was bound securely, and mounted on a small nag, whose powers of locomotion evidently had been exhausted years before, and the whole party set out on the march.

As they journeyed on, the young man's thoughts were of any thing but a pleasant nature. A prisoner in the hands of these merciless savages, with no one who knew of his whereabouts, what hope was there? If Wild Nat knew of his

plight there might be a rescue, and yet, what was one man against so many?

They traveled steadily on until late in the afternoon; then halted in a wood, and all dismounted. Wayne was considerably puzzled by the proceedings. The Indians held a short council, and finally an old, grave-looking fellow, who, Kent thought, might be a chief from his appearance, and from the deference paid him, arose and made a speech of some length. The prisoner, ignorant of the Indian tongue, of course did not comprehend a word, but he saw that the chief's wishes met with approbation, from the nods and grunts of the august assembly.

The chief sat down and the consultation ended. Kent was most unceremoniously taken from his horse and bound to a small tree. The savages evidently were greatly pleased, and while wondering what it all meant, their prisoner saw several Indians busily engaged in gathering wood, which they deposited near him. The mystery was explained! He was about to be burned at the stake!

The Indians, of whom there were fifteen or sixteen, began to yell and jabber violently, and jumped about, brandishing their war clubs and tomahawks alarmingly near the prisoner's head, who heartily wished they would strike a hatchet into his skull, and save him from the fearful death before him. He could meet death bravely in any form, but to be burned at the stake—to die by inches in excruciating torture—the thought was one of horror.

The wood was piled about him, at a little distance, to the height of a couple of feet, built up artistically with dry fagots, that looked as if they carried in their gray hearts a world of heat and flame.

At last all was ready; the match was applied, and the little tongues of fire began to curl up among the fagots, creeping slowly, but surely, among the dry wood, and lapping hungrily about the sticks as if impatient for its victim.

The young man resolved to die bravely, and as the heat increased so that he began to feel its effects, he mentally commended his soul to heaven and breathed a prayer for the safety and welfare of his aged parents, who would mourn his unknown fate.

The savages were executing a wild war-dance, mingled with shouts and songs, and accompanied by waving of clubs and tomahawks, and brandishing of knives. In the shadow of the falling twilight their dusky forms swayed to and fro, and their painted faces, lit by the increasing flames, looked more like the faces of fiends than human beings.

The forked tongues of fire crawled on, increasing in strength and fury every moment. Already Kent began to feel their scorching effects. His knees were almost blistered, and the dense, rising smoke nearly suffocated him.

Suddenly he heard the brands behind him rattle as if thrown aside by a hasty hand; the same instant he felt the bands that bound him loosened, and a voice which he instantly recognized as that of Vic Potter, shouted:

"Run for yer life! Take thet, ye yaller rips!" and he fired his rifle with such effect that two savages rolled in the dust, and, drawing his knife, struck another who stood in his path; then snatching Kent's gun and powder-horn, which leaned against a tree near at hand, he bounded away into the woods, closely followed by Kent, and vanished in a twinkling!

So intent were the Indians on their barbarous work, that this sudden onslaught of the guide completely surprised them, and with such suddenness and celerity did he do his work, that, before they could recover the shock, he was out of sight.

Then, with wild whoops of disappointment and rage they started in pursuit.

"Foller me," said Vic, as he sprung before the young man, "an' in tew minits we'll be out o' danger, so tew speak. Hear the cusses yell!"

The trapper made no slow work of measuring the distance, and Kent was not far behind. After five minutes of hard running and dodging, the trapper darted round a dense thicket, followed by the other. Kent was surprised to see a man seated on a horse and holding another animal by the halter.

"Up behind me," shouted Vic, springing into the saddle. "Fleetfoot is good for both of us."

The young man mounted with a bound, and the horses dashed away.

"Varmints!" exclaimed the trapper. "Jist hear 'em holler! Guess they'll find the game has giv' 'em the slip. Ye see they started after us afore, an' in course they can't catch us that way, an' it'll take 'em some time to go arter their hosses."

"You arrived just in time," said Kent, as they swept along. "Ten minutes later it would have been too late."

"Zackly," responded the trapper. "It war lucky I happened along. Ye see, Scip and I—"

"Is that Scip?" interrupted Kent. "I hadn't thought to ask who it war, and the darkness prevented me from seeing. How are you, Tarp? So you concluded to try life on the plains a while, eh?"

"Yes," replied the negro. "Vic said mout as well. I's rider found all de Indians, but, he says, dar's no danger. Looks like it, yo betn' tied up ter brile! Wish I'd staid wid de emergrants."

"There's no danger, so long as you keep out of their way," laughed Kent; "but the trouble is to keep out of reach. I flatter myself that the time I made this morning would be hard to beat, but I fell into their hands after all."

"How war it?" asked Vic.

The young man then related the circumstances of his capture, adding:

"We have distanced our pursuers. There is nothing to be heard."

"Come arder their animals," said Vic. "Which way is the cave?"

"South-west," replied Kent.

"Guess we'll p'int for thar, then," said the trapper.

The horses' heads were accordingly turned in that direction, and the little party swept on.

CHAPTER VI.

A HAPPY MEETING.

Two months passed uneventfully the events already recorded.

The scene is laid in an Indian village on the banks of the Sweetwater river, and the hour just before sunset.

In a lodge, considerably larger than the others, the curtain-door of which is lifted, sits a young girl, gazing out upon the river and woodlands.

Her head is supported on her hand, a look of deep sadness overpreads her features, and her soft, dark eyes are full of tears. It is Marion Verne, who, since the night of her capture, has been a prisoner among the Indians. She was adopted by the sachem of the tribe, to be a companion for his daughter, and had been treated with kindness. But she felt as if utterly forsaken—so far from home and friends, with no one but savages for company, and with no prospect of escape. Could she spend her life with those creatures? she asked herself for the hundredth time. No; a thousand times no; and yet how could she avert her fate? Of late a new trouble had come upon her. A young chief, named the Panther, had offered her the honor of becoming his squaw, and as An-ga-ta, (the sachem's favored wife), the poor girl was in despair.

Her musings were suddenly interrupted by the entrance of Neenah, the daughter of An-ga-ta.

"My sister is sad," she said, in broken English, which she had learned from Marion. "Can Neenah help her? She does not like to see the Dark Eyes unhappy."

"Would not Neenah be sad if An-ga-ta's little son were a brave she did not love?" asked Marion.

The Indian girl smiled. "Neenah would. Does not the Dark Eyes love the Panther? He is very good and brave. Long ago he had eyes for Neenah and ears for her words. Since Dark Eyes came he sees only her," said the girl, sadly.

"Why does he leave you, to seek one who is of another people?" asked Marion.

"His heart has forgotten Neenah," replied the girl. "He is now talking with An-ga-ta. He wants my sister."

"Oh!" said Marion, "I can not marry him! If your father would only let me go to my people!"

At that moment a shadow crossed the doorway, and the great sachem entered. Seating himself gravely, he continued in silence for some minutes.

"The Panther seeks the Dark Eyes," he said at last. "He would have her to tan his skins, and keep his lodge-fire burning. When three suns shall pass, the marriage feast will be eaten and the Dark Eyes be given to the Panther. Let her prepare."

So saying the chief arose, and folding his blanket around him left the lodge, leaving Marion bewildered and despairing. She sat for a long time weeping bitterly, and paying little heed to Neenah's expression of sympathy, and then retired to her couch.

All the long night she lay awake, thinking over the chief's words, and trying to devise some plan of escape. So far from finding any, she only grew bewildered thinking of it, and with the first rays of dawn fell into an uneasy sleep.

The day passed drearily enough, and night came again and passed, and yet Marion was undecided how to act. The morning of the second day she arose, and dressing herself hastily, went out. She had always been allowed to walk about the village, the Indians knowing that there was no danger of her attempting to escape. To escape from them would only be to fall into the claws of some wild beast, or perish in the wilds from hunger and exposure. The day wore on while she rambled about, or sat in the shade of bushes on the river's bank, gazing into its shining depths, and thinking of her circumstances. This was the last day of her freedom--if the morrow found her here, she would be made the wife of the Panther, according to Indian law. The thought was horrible! Every moment she grew more desperate. What could she do? Could she fly from the village and find her way to civilization? It was one hundred miles to Fort Laramie; could she ever reach there on foot? There was a

bare chance of her falling in with some emigrants, yet it was hardly a chance, at all, so improbable was it. There were nine chances out of ten that she would perish before she could reach any fort or settlement, but death was far preferable to living with an Indian. She determined to try for her life.

Going leisurely through the village with some flowers in her hands, she attracted no unusual attention, and arrived at the chieftain's lodge just after the hour of noon. She waited patiently till night, and retired as usual. She was somewhat puzzled to know how to leave the lodge without Neenah's knowledge, as they occupied one couch. Trusting to Providence, she lay down as usual, and waited. For a while the Indian girl tossed about the couch, but, at length, her deep, regular breathing gave evidence that she was asleep. But not yet could our heroine start. The village had not subsided into quiet.

She waited, hoping and fearing, until it was midnight.

Neenah still slept.

Rising silently, Marion robed herself, and with great care not to arouse the Indian girl, nor the chief, stole into the outer room of the lodge. She knew that, in there, was some jerked venison, and a small cake, made of corn meal. These she meant to take with her.

In this room slept the sachem, and Marion's heart beat rapidly as she entered. If he awoke, and saw her! His couch was in one corner, and the girl slowly and silently crossed the room. She had reached the venison and cake, and was returning, when the sachem moved, and evidently thinking he heard something, half arose! Quick as thought, Marion sunk down and waited. The chief glanced around the apartment, and not seeing the crouching figure, and hearing nothing, with a sleepy "Ugh?" composed himself for sleep.

Breathlessly, Marion crouched on the floor, not daring to stir, lest he should be aroused.

Ten, fifteen minutes passed; then the girl rose softly and flitted out. Gliding through her room, she noiselessly untied the outer door of skins and passed out. Closing it behind her, she paused a moment to look around. Every thing was

quiet and in darkness. The night was rather cloudy, but still light enough for objects to be quite distinct at a few rods distant.

With a beating heart and a murmured prayer, the maiden threaded her way between the lodges, keeping in the shadow as much as possible, and moving with the utmost caution and silence. Meeting with no obstacles, she very soon cleared the village, and stood outside in the silence and gloom.

For a moment her heart failed her. Before her lay the wide forests and extended plains, the abode of wild animals and savage Indians, and but for these, and an occasional trapper, utterly in solitude !

Marion was not very courageous by nature, and the darkness and wildness before her made her tremble with dread ; but, one thought of what lay behind nerved her, and she stepped boldly forward. At any moment her absence might be discovered, and this made her quicken her steps. The clouds obscured the stars, but, turning her face in the direction she supposed Fort Laramie to be, she hastened forward, not dreaming that, in her haste and excitement, she was going directly from it !

Wearily the girl traveled on, growing at length so tired that she could hardly stand ; but, anxious to get away still further from the pursuers, who, she felt certain, were, before this time, on her track, she stumbled forward, until the first yellow light in the east drew her attention. Then, to her despair, she discovered her error. All these weary miles she had gone the wrong way !

Worn out and exhausted, she searched for a spot where she would be screened from observation, to lie down and rest. Besides, she dared not travel by day. Seeking a little thicket of bushes and vines she threw herself on the ground, and tired and weary, soon fell asleep.

All day long she thus rested, waking but once or twice ; but late in the afternoon she was aroused by a rough touch on her arm. Starting up, she beheld the Panther bending over her, and several other Indians standing near !

Once more a prisoner !

The chief took her up without a word, and placed her on a mustang, which he evidently had brought for her use. Thus

mounted, they started toward the village, the other Indians following at some distance on foot. The Panther made no remark, but he kept his hand on her bridle-rein.

They rode slowly for some distance. The wretched maiden had not uttered a word, and seemed to be totally passive. The Panther congratulated himself on his easy success. But, while Marion was silent, she was not unmoved. True, she was almost in despair, but she resolved that she *would not* go back to the village. Yet, *how* to escape?

While she was revolving the matter in her mind, the Indians behind got into some kind of a dispute, which attracted the Panther's attention. Halting, he for a moment dropped the rein and began to talk to them. Taking advantage of his inattention, Marion suddenly raised her deer-thong whip and struck her horse a stinging blow. The enraged animal started off like a shot.

The savages behind, in their hot anger did not stop their dispute, until the chief yelled furiously at them, which he did in a very menacing manner. Seeing there was no likelihood of overtaking his charge, he called out to the others to shoot her horse, himself setting the example.

Meantime Marion, with the courage born of desperation, was urging her horse forward in the deep twilight of the woods, when a shower of bullets flew like hail around her. One, more steadily aimed than the others, struck her steed, and he fell beneath her. Springing off, as she felt him sinking, she darted forward into the thickest of the undergrowth, the fearful yells of the savages making her blood curdle.

As she worked her way forward in the thicket, she caught a glimpse, as she passed it, of a large cottonwood, growing within a small clump of bushes. Into this cover she drew herself. To her great surprise, she discovered a small opening in the giant tree. It was so nearly hidden as to be almost invisible. It appeared large enough to afford a retreat, and she nimbly wedged herself in it, arranging the little clump of surrounding bushes so as to entirely hide it.

She had barely done so when the Indians burst into the opening, and ran whooping and yelling in every direction around the tree, and passing so close that Marion trembled lest the loud throbbing of her heart should betray her.

The savages beat the bushes all around, and for some distance in advance, of course without success. The constantly deepening darkness made every minute add to her security. In a half-hour's time the savages were gone. Waiting awhile, she at length, with excessive caution, ventured out, and hurried away from the spot as fast as possible. After walking about three miles she came to the edge of the plain. It was very dark, and afar off she heard the howl of the wolves. She shuddered lest the fierce animals should get on her track. There was but little light from the stars, but shaping her course by the little there was, she went wearily on. She was getting fearfully tired, and feeling almost as if she did not care whether she lived or died, when she caught sight of a small light, apparently a couple of miles distant. It was evidently the camp-fire of some one, but whether of friend or **savage foe she could not tell.**

After considering the matter awhile she concluded to go forward, feeling confident that she could get close enough to ascertain whether it was whites or Indians before she would be discovered. Accordingly she hastened on, and when within twenty rods of the fire, began to be very cautious. The fire had died down to a bed of smoldering coals, and the light it afforded was not sufficient to reveal the forms around it.

As she flitted about, continually changing her position to enable her to see better, and gradually drawing nearer the fire, she was electrified by hearing a rough but good-natured voice exclaim :

"Would it be ill-mannered in me to politely ask ye whar **ye might be goin' ?**"

The maiden stopped with a joyful cry. It was the voice of a friend, although a stranger. While she stood silent, a tall, slab-sided, long-nosed man advanced from the darkness, and **came up to her, trailing a long rifle.**

"'Tain't often I see a woman," he said, looking at her as if struck by a sudden idea ; " therefore ye'll considerably excuse my manners. Jist let me ask if yer name is Marion Verne ?"

"It is," replied Marion. "May I ask who you are, and how you happened to see me?"

"Nat Rogers, at yer service," replied the trapper, for **it**

was none other than he. "An' as for seein' ye, I ginerally have my optickles peeled. I've been follerin' ye 'round ever since ye 'gan tew look at that fire out thar. Ye'll find some friends out thar. Let's be pokin' that way. I konklude thet ye got away from the Injuns."

"I escaped last night," replied Marion, as they approached the fire.

As they came up, Vic Potter sprung to his feet with wild ejaculations, and Marion saw behind him a dark visage, distorted with a broad grin of wonder and pleasure.

"Varmints! Is it actually Marion?" cried Vic, taking her hand and giving it a hearty shake.

"It certainly is," replied the girl, with a smile. "Why—Wayne!"

The young man came forward, his handsome face aglow with pleasure.

"I'm glad to see you," he said, simply; but the words brought a blush to Marion's face. "How glad you may imagine, when I tell you that I never expected to see you again. How in the world did you come here?"

"I will tell you presently," she replied, shaking hands with the grinning Scip. And then she related to her earnest listeners all that had befallen her.

"It is fortunate I found you. I don't think I could have reached Fort Laramie alive."

"Know ye couldn't," said Wild Nat. "Ye'd starved tew death 'fore ye got half-way there."

The little party felt very merry and laughed and talked till a late hour. Wild Nat was "moved" to relate some large stories.

"Golly," said Scip. "Dese skeeters is mighty sassy. Der awful big, too! Yah, but dey bites sharp!"

"Pooh," said Wild Nat, "these ain't *nothin'* tew what I've seen. When I war down in Texas I seen *skeeters*. They war big as woodpeckers."

"Oh, g'way now!" remonstrated Scip. "'S if I didn't kno' dar neber war no skeeters big 's dat ar'! 'Tain't in de line o' reason, dat ain't."

"It's so," said the trapper, gravely. "Ye see, Scip, in the hot countries they grow bigger. I've seen 'em quite often as

big as young turkeys, an' skeeters the size of woodpeckers warn't nothin' uncommon!"

Scip said no more, but became very serious.

"Let's roll up an' snooze," said Vic. "I'm gittin' sleepy, an' we must be off airy. The Injuns will be arter the lady, an' we'll stan' a chance of gittin' rubbed out if we don't make tracks lively. Spose we'll have tew go tew the cave for the present, an' lay low till thar animosity cools off a little, 'fore startin' for civilization."

"How far is it to the cave you speak of?" asked Marion.

"'Bout fifteen miles," replied Vic.

And then they lapsed into slumber.

Morning broke bright and clear, and the little party were off for the cave in good season. There was no immediate danger apprehended, and they rode at a moderate pace, enjoying the fresh breeze and the exhilarating influence of the ride. When about ten miles from their rendezvous, they perceived a large herd of buffalo quietly feeding about a mile distant.

"I'd like some sport with 'em," said Wild Nat. "It's tew bad tew let sich a chance as thet go. But we'll have tew, I opine. 'Twon't do tew keep the little 'un here an' have her in danger of Injuns." And the trapper gazed after the herd with a sigh.

"Tell ye what I'll dow," said Vic, halting his horse. "I'll take Marion to the cave, an' ye can all stay an' hunt if ye like. 'Twould be a good plan tew hev some fresh meat. What say?"

"E pluribus," exclaimed Wild Nat; "jist the show! Kent, ye jist hand Marion tew Vic, an' in about tew jerks of a beaver's tail we'll snatch some o' them buillers by the tail, an' pull thar skins off over thar horns."

Accordingly, Marion, who for want of a horse had been obliged to ride behind Kent, mounted behind Vic, and the two kept on their way to the cave, while the others started on the hunt.

CHAPTER VII.

HOLED.

LEAVING Vie and the girl to pursue their way, we will follow the hunters.

They had an exciting chase, and brought down several fine animals, from which they selected a considerable quantity of the choicest portions, and then prepared to start for the cave.

As Wild Nat untied the halter of his steed from the horns of a buffalo, he suddenly straightened himself up, and bounding into the saddle, exclaimed :

"Look thar ! We're in for a race."

Kent turned, and looked in the direction indicated, and saw, not forty rods distant, a large band of mounted Indians coming toward them at a furious gallop.

"Turn toes !" shouted Nat. "Don't let the grass grow under yer feet nather," and in an instant the three were flying over the prairie, followed by the whooping savages.

At first they all kept together, but in a short time the mule betroude by Slip evidently came to the conclusion that there was no necessity for him to exert himself quite so much, and slackened his pace, so as to be several rods in the rear of Kent and Rogers, much to the dismay of his rider, who alternately addressed himself to the mule and to his friends in advance.

"G'long, ye obstinate hesters," he exclaimed, with a terrified glance over his shoulder. "Don' ye know we shall be clean gobbled up an' eat, we shall ? G'long, I tell ye ! In 'nother minnit we shall be catched ef ye don't hurry. G'long, ye lazy debbel ! G'long !"

Then raising his voice :

"Hol' on dar, boys ! 'Tadn't fair to run away from a feller in dis way, 'clar' 'tain't ! Hol' on ; dar's no sort o' danger. What ye goin' so fast for ?

Git up ! G'long ! Oh ! o o h ! Gorry, we shall be kill

ed," he spluttered, as an arrow flew past him. "Now, see here, ole hoss, you *mus'* go faster, 'deed ye mus'! Don'no' what ye mean by gwine so slow. Don' ye know—

"I say dar, ye fellers is scart! Dar's no sense in yer gwine so fast, fur dar ain't a *spec'* o' danger, not a *bit'*! Jes' see how cool dis chile takes it! Don' look well fur ye to go so fast, nohow. Hol' on now! I tell ye dar's no -- Oh, de Lor'! *G'long!*"

The frightened darky "ducked" his head, as an arrow struck the fore-shoulder of the mule, and was agreeably surprised to see that this time his "*G'long*" was heeded, for, the mule, feeling the arrow, kicked his heels in the air, and with a snort was off, with such an increase of speed, that in a moment he had overtaken the others, and thereafter, the only trouble his rider had, was to keep him from going too fast.

"Ye ain't takin' it so *cool* as ye was, be ye?" asked Wild Nat, as the negro shot past him.

"Ye'd better go faster," answered Scip; "dey ain't fur behind, an' it's much dang'rous to have 'em so clus. Will dey catch us, t'ink?"

"Guess not," replied the trapper. "In half an hour we'll be on tew Deep Creek, an' I guess we'll fool 'em then. Ef we don't," he added, under his breath, "it'll be apt tew go hard with us, for the buffer-hunt tired our horses somewhat."

Silence ensued between the trio, who anxiously watched the distance between themselves and pursuers, and were gratified to observe that it did not perceptibly lessen.

On they went at a steady gallop. Wild Nat had said that as long as it was possible to keep out of reach at that pace, it was best, as their animals would soon need their strength for the final stretch.

The Indians were about thirty rods distant. Ten, fifteen minutes passed, and then the fugitives approached the bank of Deep Creek.

"Foller me," exclaimed the old trapper, as his horse plunged into the stream, followed by the others.

They were in the woods, so that their pursuers were hidden from view, and Kent was surprised to see that the trapper

headed his horse up the stream, thereby going closer to the Indians, who were up the creek a short distance, and not far from the bank.

"Keep clus tew me," said Wild Nat, "an' keep perfectly still."

"Are you mad?" asked the young man. "We are throwing ourselves into their hands."

"Be we?" said the trapper. "Wal, I guess not. D'ye want tew be sculped?"

"Of course not."

"Then foller me an' keep still. Don't shake yer jaw-bones so, Scip; they'll hear yer teeth chatter."

In dead silence the little party kept up the stream, while the yelling Indians followed their land-trail, and arrived at the stream about the time our friends were twenty rods above.

"Keep powerful still," admonished Nat, as he turned his horse's head to the shore. "Don't make a sound. Ef ye do, we're just as good as laddheaded. Keep clus tew me."

The others were not disposed to disregard this advice, and in a moment they were all on dry land.

"This way," said the trapper, starting off through the woods. "Step karful, Rocky."

The horse seemed to understand and made but little noise. After going at a trot for a short distance, the trapper struck into a gallop, in which he was imitated by the others. Ten minutes' sharp riding brought them to the little rocky gorge, leading to a small rock-enclosed dell, where the horses were generally kept.

"Step lively," said the trapper, as he dismounted; "'twen't be long till the reds will find they're fooled, an' then they'll be arter us."

"Well," said Kent, "why didn't they follow us? What prevented them from seeing we went up-stream?"

"Sandy bottom. Don't rile much an' settles so quick they couldn't see we'd been thar," replied the trapper. "They naterly s'posed we'd gone *down*, as thot war away from 'em. Wagh! Old Nat's good fer 'em yit. Now, let's *git* for the *cave*!"

With great caution and the utmost silence, the fugitives hurried through the forest, and in due time found themselves at the cave. Vic and Marion were beginning to wonder at their long absence, and were exceedingly surprised at their sudden appearance. In reply to their questions, Wild Nat related the incidents of the race, adding:

"I reckon they'll feel rather uncomfortable about losin' us so slick, but I don't feel pertikularly sorry for 'em. Ef it hadn't been that there war quite so many of 'em, we'd 'a' stood an' had a scrimmage. I'd like tew have deprived 'em of their sculp-lock. He-he! I tell ye, Vic, it war fun tew see that darkey! His teeth chattered so, when we war in the woods, they rattled us by the sound! It's a fact! I war seriously 'barned for fear we should have tew chew his butter-lump for him. Reckoned his teeth would all shake out."

"Oh, g'way now!" said Scip. "It's no such t'ing, Vic; he's foolin', he is! Warn't I 'way behind, takin' it cool, when ye fellows war rammin' like mad? Des ans'er dat, will ye."

"Yes, ye war takin' it cool! Ye war so scart ye almost fell off yer mule! Gallinippers! Ye ought tew hear him holler 'G'long!' Wagh! Wagh!"

And the trapper "laughed til he cried" at the recollection, while the indignant darkey relapsed into silky silence.

Wild Nat had joked at the negro so frequently concerning his cowardice, that he was getting to be sensitive on that subject.

"How long will we have to stay here?" asked Marion.

"'Bout two days, I reckon," replied Vic. "'Thar's one thin' that I don't see how we are goin' tew git around. 'Thar's no loss for Marion, an', blow me, ef I know whar we ar' goin' tew git one."

"It's a power," said Wild Nat, "but I've heern say that perseverance an' sweet ile will overcome any thin', an' we've got the perseverance, if not the ile. Mobby bluffer fat would ans'er, though."

For the remainder of the day no one left the cave, but at dark Wild Nat went out to attend to the animals, and insisted on having Scip accompany him. That worthy rather demurred.

"Yer afraid!" said the trapper, contemptuously.

"Ain't neither, tell you. Nebber war scart in my life," retorted the darkey. "De trade is, my head aches, an' I don't feel like walkin'."

"Head aches!" ejaculated the trapper. "Wal, I should think it would! Ef my teeth had danced a double-shuffle for two month of time yerdid, I couldn't work in a month. Don't the hinge of yer jaw want ilein'?"

"Ye shet yer mouf!" replied Scip. "'S if I didn't know ye's a lyin'. My teeth never dithered! I dunno what avert means; nebber war scart in my life!"

"I guess ye never war," said Wild Nat. "Not more'n a thousand times. It war a sight. Vix, ter see him drum his mule an' holler—"

"Shet up!" roared Scip. "Where's my hat?"

And jamming his tib down over his woolly hood, the darkey left the cave. The trapper followed, and in silence they took their way to the dell. Arrived at the narrow gorge which led thither, the trapper told the negro to remain there while he went and attended to the horses.

"Keep a sharp eye out for reds," he added, "an' if any of 'em gobbles ye up, just holler an' I'll be lare in thim ter sculp ye."

With which comforting remark he vanished in the darkness, leaving the terrified African to his own reflections. He by no means relished the idea of being there alone, but knowing there was no alternative, he fortified his courage as well as he was able, and tried to think there was no danger.

"No sorter use in me standin' lare," he grumbled, after some time; "ain't a spee' o' danger of any one comin' thong. De trade is, he's coward hisself. What's dat black thog? Oh, de Lor'! S'pose it should be an Injun! 'Tain't dat; it's nothin' but a stump. Why don't dat feller come flog?"

He leaned against the rocky wall, and peered fearfully around him, as if expecting to see something advanced from the darkness upon him. To his terror his expectations were realized. Before him, at the distance of half a dozen yards, rose up a tall, dark form, which advanced toward him, with uplifted arm.

"Oh, de Lor', I'm a goner!" yelled the terrified African, as he turned and ran precipitately toward the cave, followed by the object of his fright, at a little distance behind.

"Ha! ha!" chuckled the pursuer, in a voice that sounded suspiciously like the trapper's. "He feels like runnin' ef not like walkin'! Guess I'll stop; he'll think I'm arter him all the same."

And the mischievous trapper slackened his pace, and walked leisurely along. Not so with Scip. He made the best time he was capable of, and that was by no means slow—stumbling over sticks and stones in his headlong career, and not once stopping to look behind. As he howled along, head down and arms flying, he was suddenly grasped and thrown to the ground.

Wild Nat, walking slowly at some distance behind, was startled suddenly by a succession of yells and shrieks of the negro, of such an earnest and explosive kind, as convinced him something serious was the matter.

Grasping his knife and revolver, he bounded forward, and in a moment had reached the scene. In the darkness he could only distinguish several dark forms struggling on the ground, among which he had no difficulty in recognizing Scip, from the volley of exclamations and ejaculations, interspersed with grunts and groans, which issued from his mouth.

The trapper fired his revolver at two of the enemy and then grappled with a third, leaving only one for the negro to contend with. The trapper's adversary was a large, muscular Indian, and for a time it seemed doubtful which one would come off conqueror. They rolled over and over in the darkness, sometimes the hunter uppermost and anon the savage. At length the trapper, whose right hand held the throat of the savage, and whose left pinioned the arm of his adversary, discovered that the Indian, with his unoccupied hand, was endeavoring to draw his knife. Still keeping his hold he waited till the knife was partly drawn from the sheath, and then letting go his hold on the savage's throat, he grasped the knife and plunged it into his red bosom almost to the haft.

Snaking himself loose from his now helpless foe, he turned to see how the negro fared.

"Take dat?" he was saying, "an' dat, an' dat! Yah, yah! Guess ye never see dis nigger butt! I'll learn ye to tackle niggers what's walkin' peaceably 'long an' mindin' dere own concerns. Don't ye wish ye'd never soid dis chile? Yah, yah!"

"Want enny help?" asked Wild Nat.

"Not a spee'! Dis chile's good fur one Injun. He's mos' dead now. Take dat; durn ye," and with a tremendous whack on his adversary's head, the negro rose to his feet. In the excitement of the fight he had forgotten his cowardice and fought with a purpose, and to a purpose, as his prostrate foe showed.

"We'd better be gittin' out o' this," remarked the trapper, as he coolly replaced his knife. "It's no ways likely these are all thur is about. And in view of this fact, it might be as well for us tew emigrate."

Accordingly the two men left the spot in silence, and with great caution. The trapper well knew that the four Indians were not alone, and that in all likelihood there was a large party not far distant.

When near the cave they encountered Vic, who had sallied out on hearing the firing, and together they entered the cavern.

"Are you all safe?" asked Kent, anxiously, as the tall form of Wild Nat appeared from the passage-way.

"Safe an' sound," responded the trapper, as the others entered.

"What was the trouble?" asked Kent.

"Wal, ye see," said the trapper, with a sly twinkle, "Scip war walkin' peaceably 'long, when he war set upon by four of the red niggers. Naterly enough, he didn't like tew be disturbed in a quiet walk, an' he—wal, he hollered a few, an' I rived in time tew make the 'quintance of three on 'em, an' he finished t'other one."

"Guess he wished he hadn't started a peaceable nigger," said Scip, loftily.

"How'd ye come tew be down thar, when I told ye tew wait in the gorge till I come?" asked Wild Nat, gravely.

The negro was taken slightly aback.

"I—wal—ye see—I—I got tired waitin' fur ye, so I started this way. I went slow, an' knowed ye'd catch me 'fore I got here," stammered the confused darkey.

"Yas. Mought I ask what ye call goin' fast, ef yer gait was slow? I shouldn't like tew run a race with ye ef *that's* a slow gait with ye. Why didn't ye bug that feller that 'peared to yo ther in the gorge, 'stead o' runnin' like a streak o' lightnin'?" asked the trapper.

Scip stared. "I didn't—I—I ~~was~~ run?" he ejaculated at last. "Whar was you?"

"Warn," laughed Wild Nat. "I crept up ther an' riz up suddenly afore ye. Reckon yer blood must be kinder stag-rund standin' so long, an' thought a little exercise mought be good for ye. Ha! ha!" and the trapper laughed till the cave rung.

"I would 'a' done ye good tew ~~see~~ that race," he continued. "I've seen locomotives runnin' full steam down grade, but it warn't a circumstance thing side o' that darter! He looked like a streak o' greased lightning, an' went about as fast. Ef I could be came in that style, I wouldn't look at any horse that ever lived. I'd give up trappin' an' go tew carryin' telegraph dispatches. 'Locomotiv telegraph' wouldn't be nowhar, for speed."

And again the trapper indulged in a hearty laugh, in which he was joined by the others, with one exception. Scip did not seem to see where the laugh came to, and sat in morose silence.

Shortly after this, they prepared for the night. Several skins were spread down and quite a comfortable couch formed for Marion, and the men stretched themselves out on the cave floor.

The following day wore wearily away. About noon Vic took his rifle and started out, saying:

"We're 'bein' out of grub, an' I want tew stretch myself. Don't worry 'bout the redskins. Ef they hear my gun, which 'tain't likely they will, as it's got too faintly of now, an' 'll be off, they'll know it's a trapper or an Indian, an' it's the gal they're after. Ef they git after us, I'll bet they'll have a chance tew measure sile."

The cave was dreary enough. The only light was that afforded by a torch, and as, of course, the inmates were doomed to idleness, time passed rather slowly. Marion expressed a wish to see the cave, and Kent procured a torch and led the way, followed by Scip and the maid.

"Will you come?" asked Kent of the trapper, who made no movement to join them.

"No, guess not," was the reply. "I've 'spected it often 'nough. Go ahead."

The trio proceeded through the various rooms, wondering and admiring the structure, and to Marion, who had never before been in a cave, it was a wonderful place.

"One thing about this puzzles me," said the young man, holding the torch aloft, as they stood in the furthest apartment, "and it is this. There is a slight circulation of air through the cavern, very perceptible when the stone is removed from the entrance; but there is no trace of an opening anywhere. I have scouted repeatedly without success."

"This apartment is higher than the other," said Marion. "How gloomy it looks! Hold the torch this way, Wayne; I fancy that spot looks peculiar. Ah! it is an opening!"

"True," said Kent, "but it is high up. And the wall is on such an angle that climbing is impossible. I regret it, as I have some curiosity to know where it opens. It seems strange that it should admit no light. It is at least twenty feet from the floor."

Having thoroughly explored that part of the cavern, the party slowly retraced their steps to the first room. Vic had returned, and the two trappers sat in a dejected attitude, which struck Kent with a thrill of apprehension.

"What is the matter?" he asked.

"Ye look sort o' down in de mouth," said Scip, without waiting for a reply. "Yer lubly countenances is drawed down to a 'larming length. What's up?"

"Matter enough," said Vic, replying to Kent's question. "*The Indians have discovered the cave, and are bound up.*"

Marion sunk down pale with apprehension.

"Oh de Lor'!" ejaculated Scip, "what'll we do?"

"How did it happen?" asked Kent.

"Wal," said Vic, "it war in this way. I war 'way up the creek two three miles, an' I had a little boat with three copper skins, an' worsted two on 'em an' fether one took log-bail. I kep' a sharp look out, an' I'm powerful sartin there warn't any o' 'em follered me, but the fact is, the woods is full o' 'em. I seen more'n forty signs. I come back here an'

hadn't been here long when I heerd a noise at the doorway thar. I jest peeked out of the passage, an' thar war a pesky red-skin peekin' in! I got my gun up a little the quickest, but the imp see'd me an' drawed back, an' slammed the stun down in a jilly. Then we heerd them jabberin' out thar, an' hootin' an' yellin'."

"That must have been the noise I heard when in the further cave," remarked Kent. "It was so faint I supposed it was Nat, and thought no more about it. If there was only another outlet to the place! We discovered a small opening in the last apartment, but it is twenty feet from the floor, and can not be reached."

"Why?" asked Nat, "can't we climb?"

"Law," put in Scip, "the wall slants toward the middle of the room at the top. It's like clim'in' the underside of a ladder that's set slantin'. Can't be done, nohow."

At the close of this scientific explanation, the trapper started up, and taking the torch, said:

"I'm goin' tew see. Come, Kent."

The young man followed, but in ten minutes they returned, saying that it would be impossible to escape through there, even if it led to the outer air, which was by no means certain.

"It's entirely impossible to reach that hole," said Wild Nat, throwing down the torch he held. "It can't be done. We're in a trap, that's sartin. We mought dig out of the mountain warn't so all-fired steep. As it is thar's no chance how come out fur enough from the alligators tew escape unseen; an' that ain't the worst on't nuther. Ninety nine chances out'n a hundred, that we'd come tew rocks that would stop our tunnel."

"It's a tight place," said Vic. "Fur's I'm concerned, I shouldn't mind runnin' out thar an' fightin' my way, or die tryin' it, but the gal's a different matter."

"Then I suppose we must content ourselves to stay here and starve," said Kent. "Of course the Indians will stay here."

"In *course*," said Vic, "but then, *sothin'* may turn up. We won't give up anyhow. Be ye purty courageous, Marion?"

"I can stand it as long as any one," she returned, bravely.

"That's the talk!" said Vic. "Thar's no danger of starvin' for three days anyhow. This buffler-hump an' haunch of venison will last that long, an' meantime we can use our wits tew find a way tew git out."

The rest of the day passed slowly enough. None of the captives felt very cheerful, and but for their serious situation, Scip's lamentations would have been ludicrous. He wished he had never come among "the Injuns," and declared if he "ever got among white folks ag'in, guess nobody'd catch him runnin' 'round among wild Injuns!"

Night came at last, and the inmates of the cave retired as usual, with the exception of Wild Nat, who acted as sentinel. He took his station near the passage, and with old "Rouser," across his knees, kept watch through the long night.

It was nearly morning, being the "darkest hour just before dawn," when the hardy trapper, who had not once closed his eyes, heard a slight sound near the entrance of the passage. Instantly he was on the alert, and with ear strained, and eyes wide open, bent slightly forward, peering into the darkness.

The grating sound continued a moment, then a faint ray of light pierced the obscurity, and the outlines of a man's head and shoulders appeared. In another moment the loud report of a rifle reverberated through the cavern, and with a howl of pain the form disappeared.

"Wagh!" chuckled the trapper, dropping the butt of his rifle to the ground. "Guess *that* feller won't have any call to 'splore this 'ere vicinity jist at the present speakin'. Reck-on thar was an idee struck him—or suthin' else!"

"All manner'us!" he continued, as the sleeping men sprung up with exclamations of surprise, and the startled Merlon asked what the matter was. "All right; I jist had occasion tew deal out justice tew a feller that was tryin' tew sneak in without a pass! I sot as judge an' jury, an' convicted the chap of evil intentions, an' abated him, as a common nuisance."

"Z-e-k'ly so," said Vic. "I shouldn't 'spose they'd be sich fools as tew think we'd sleep with both eyes shut. Guess they think we're *green*."

"Reckon they'll find we've got our eye-teeth cut," said Wild Nat, as he rammed down a bullet.

"Oh, golly," sighed Scip, "I wish I war safe in the States. 'Tain't no fun 'tall, to fight Injuns."

"I wish we were safe out of here," said Kent, with an involuntary glance at Marion.

"I'm with ye thar," said Vic, emphatically. "Freeze me ef I ain't."

"I wouldn't mind it so much ef 'twarn't for the gal," said Wild Nat, in a low tone, "tho' in course, I hein't emy hankerin' tew starve in here. My matter is, 'plenty of brilled buffler-hump, an' onlimited liberty.'"

The Indians were evidently satisfied with their attempt, for they made no further movement. Dawn soon came, but brought no change to the imprisoned party. The day wore on, noon followed morning, and evening noon, as Kent's watch showed; and still there was no change. Immured in the bowels of the mountain, afar in the vast wilderness, with no human being who knew of their situation, save their merciless foes outside, how could they hope for aught save death?

CHAPTER VIII.

THE LAST HOPE.

It was the morning of the fourth day since the Indians had discovered the cave. The beleaguered whites had repeatedly endeavored to reach the opening in the last cavern, and had dug a tunnel in two directions, but were stopped both times after going a short distance by immense rocks. Their food was very nearly consumed, in spite of the fact that they had placed themselves on limited rations.

Vic, Wild Nat and Scip were prowling about the various rooms, endeavoring for the hundredth time, to discover some mode of escape, while in the outer cavern Marion and Kent, sat engaged in conversation.

"I could meet death bravely for myself," Kent was saying,

"but for you to die in such a fearful manner, away in this wilderness—oh, my darling, it is so hard!"

Marion looked up with a brave smile.

"Death will not seem hard, knowing that you love me," she said, simply. "We will go together."

He bent and kissed her.

"God bless you!" he said.

Silence fell between them then, broken by the entrance of Wild Nat, followed by the others. The tall form of the old hunter looked taller and more lank than ever, as he strode into the room and sat down with a sort of snort.

"This 'ere thin' is guthin' rather thersome," he said, giving his speech emphasis by a series of snorts. "I'll be teetotally flumbustercated 'fore very long. Wouldn't I jist like tew git a chance at them yaller-skinned crows out yonder! I'll bet my jack-knife ag'in a chunk of lead, that they'd wish they'd died years ago! Fact is," went on the hunter, with a benignant grin, "I don't believe it agrees with me tew not have 'nough tew eat. Some folks may git along without grub, but I swar I can't! My constitution ain't adapted, so tew speak, tew livin' on air. It ain't, I vum!"

"Nor me neither," said Seip, loudly and cheerily. "I hain't had a square meal in four days. I can't live on nuffin, an' dar's no use in t'inkin' ob it. Ef I can't hab suffin eatable 'fore long I shall be dwindled away to a skeleton. I wished I'd nebber come West."

"We have heard nothing of the Indians since day before yesterday," said Kent. "Is it not possible that they may have left?"

"Humph!" said Vic, who sat near; "of you knowed 'em as well as I dew, ye wouldn't think of sich a thing. They are layin' low, in hopes that we'll be fools enough tew think they're gone, an' come out. A tomhawk waits for the fast man that shows his head."

Seip noticed Kent's remark, but did not hear Vic's reply, and appeared to be busily considering the chances of such a thing.

"Like 'nough dey have gone," he said, after a little; "'twouldn't do no hurt to see"

"Wal," said Vic, "s'posen ye go out an' see."

"On Lor'!" ejaculated Scip, "I can't. S'pose dey was dar, whar'd I be? You g'long!"

"Wal," said Vic, "I'm about caved in for want of some grub, an' we are all in the same fix. I'm a goin' tew take jist one more tower of this honeycomb, an' see ef I can't find a hole out. Ef I can't, we'll begin another tunnel. We won't stop tryin'; it's root hog or die."

"It is useless to try to find an opening," remarked Kent. "We have searched over and again, and had there been one we must have found it."

Vic took a survey of the cave, however, as he had done a dozen times before, and without success.

"Now, then," he said, "let's dig another tunnel. It's doubtful, but thar's a chance for success. Let's begin here."

It was with hope at a very low ebb that the men began the work. Their success had been so poor hitherto, that they were beginning to despair. One man worked at a time, and in order to advance as rapidly as possible they changed every twenty minutes, and the digger fell back to help to remove the dirt. For instance, Vic dug, pushing the dirt a little behind him. Scip came next, who pushed the dirt still further back to Kent, who advanced it to Wild Nat, whose business it was to keep the mouth of the hole clear. In this way they progressed rapidly, and in four hours had tunneled the distance of eighteen feet. Hope now began to rise. The soil was quite easily removed with their knives, and they had as yet experienced no difficulty with stones.

"We're gittin' along pretty well," remarked Wild Nat, as he industriously plunged his knife in the soil. "At this rate — Hello!"

His knife had struck something that sounded like stone. A gloom fell on the little party at the sound. Without a word the trapper continued his work, and in a moment the cause stood revealed. A huge rock—how large it was impossible to tell—obstructed the tunnel, and effectually cut off all hope in that direction. Dead silence reigned for a moment; then:

"Couldn't we dig round it?" suggested Kent, eagerly.

"Not much use to try," said Vic.

"We'll see," said Wild Nat.

They fell to work with a will. Fifteen minutes' effort proved that it was impossible, and the work was abandoned. With sinking hearts the men returned to the cave to relate to the waiting Marion the result of their undertaking.

"Wal, what next?" said Vic, throwing himself at full length on the cave-floor.

No one replied. "Next" looked very much like starvation to all. Silence reigned for some time, then Kent said:

"I propose that we take some method to find out if the Indians are really there yet."

"In course they be," said Wild Nat; "but it'll do no hurt tew see."

There was a stout stick in the cave about six feet in length. Taking this, the old trapper walked into the passageway.

"Stand behind me, Vic, and be ready to shoot the first critter ye see. Stand out of sight, the rest of ye."

The trapper then advanced, closely followed by Vic, till he could reach the entrance by means of the pole he held. Then he took off his cap and hung it on the end of the stick, and pushed gently against the stone. It gave way after a moment, and the trapper pushed his pole forward till the top of the cap was in sight from outside. Silence followed, and he advanced it a few inches. Instantly a wild whoop rent the air, and half a dozen tomahawks were buried in the cap, as the savages dashed forward to the opening. One of the Indians exposed his person to view, and instantly Vic sent a bullet into him. The howl that followed proved that the wound was fatal. Wild Nat instantly drew back his stick, and the half-raised stone fell back to its place, while the two trappers backed into the cave.

"That's over," said Vic, "an' jist as I told ye. Thar's one red skin less tew dance over our bodies, an' that's one comfort."

"I'm clean dun starved," said Scip, after a pause, with a sidelong glance toward the little pile of dried buffalo meat, all that remained of their provisions.

"Wal," said Wild Nat, "so be we all, an' as it's now purty near night, I don't know but we mought as well finish the meat. We may as well eat while thar's vittals, as thar's only

'nough for one meal anyway, an' not half a one at thet. **Fal to !**"

The half starved party needed no second bidding, and in a short time the last morsel had vanished.

"Marion," said Vic, "ye'r as near starved as any of us, an' ye don't say a word. Yer the bravest gal I ever see'd."

"No use in complaining, when it's unavoidable," she said, with a faint smile.

"Wal," said Wild Nat, "I've got one more idee. Ef thet fails, then good-by tew Betsey. Our epitaphs is writ !"

"What's the thin' tew be done?" asked Vic, while the others listened eagerly for the reply.

"Ye all know that hole in the funder cave? Wal, we've tried tew reach it an' couldn't. Now, in place of rocks an' thin's to stan' on, which we hain't got, only 'nough in all tew reach 'bout seven feet, therefore I purpose tew let 'em reach thet far, an' thet two of us, Vic an' I, as we're tallest, stan' on thear, an' one of ye climb up on us an' reach thet hole. It kin be done, an' it shell."

"And if we could get out there, no more of us than two could go, and Marion not at all," said Kent.

"In course not, but, ef it goes to the outer world, I'll go an' git some game, an' throw in for ye tew eat while I'm gone, an' then I'll p'int for somewhar arter help, ef I can't dew no better. But ef I kin git out thear I'll soon find a way tew git ye all out. Make a bark ladder or something like it, tew climb on. Whar thear's a will thear's a way. It only remains tew be seen ef one of us kin git out. So no more jabber till thet's decided."

Wild Nat and Scip repaired to the spot, leaving Kent to watch, lest the Indians should suddenly make a dash into the cave, of which, however, there was little danger.

The men first piled up all the rocks and stones they could find in the cavern, and when completed the platform was between seven and eight feet high.

"Now then, Scip," said Wild Nat, "ye must climb on our shoulders. Think ye kin do it?"

"Gaess so," responded the negro; "used to be great hand to shin up de trees arter coons."

The two trappers placed themselves side by side, in a con-

venient position, and, though Nathan was considerably taller than Vic, an extra stone under the latter's feet made up the deficiency. Scip was an expert climber, and he soon stood upright on their shoulders, whence he could reach the hole.

"Now 'vestigate, an' be quick," said Wild Nat, as the negro straightened himself up.

Scip ran his arm into the dark hole the whole length without touching any thing. Then, having been given the torch, he turned it so that the light should reveal the interior of the passage. It seemed to be a long one—how long it was impossible to say, since it extended beyond sight; but narrow, so very narrow after the first two feet as to render it impossible for a person to pass through.

Scip related these facts to the others, who were considerably discouraged by his report.

"Is thar any light at the other end?" asked Vic.

"Not dat I can see," replied Scip; "it's jist as dark as a pocket."

"Try yer knife an' see ef the rock can be cut," said Wild Nat.

"Can't make no 'pression on it," was the answer.

"Wal, git down then. *That's* all bu'sted."

Scip turned to descend, but, somehow, in the act he lost his footing and rolled heavily down, striking the wall a hard thump with his head, and bringing up on the floor of the cave.

"Golly," he muttered, rising to his feet, and rubbing himself dolefully, "dat ar' war a hard tumble. Like to broke my skull."

Wild Nat paid no attention to the negro's complaints. He was looking at the wall with a new idea. Jerking out his tomahawk he hit the wall several times, and then jumped off the platform with a subdued yell.

"Wah!" he ejaculated, "that ar's wuth a fortune. Whoop!"

"What's up?" queried Vic, who had been looking at Scip, and had not noticed Nathan's maneuver.

"Suthin' wuth while," responded the trapper; "jest hear this, will ye?" and he tapped the wall a second time.

"Varmints!" ejaculated Vic, "it's holler!"

"In course it is, an' thar's a cave t'other side. Maybe thar's an openin' out on't tew. Ye see, the wall is limestone, I s'pose. What d'ye think o' thet?"

"Whar's my knife?" replied Vic, rather irrelevantly. "Let's dig."

All three fell to work resolutely. The limestone crumbled away under their knives slowly but surely; slowly but surely the cavity grew, till in fifteen minutes the point of Vic's knife went through with a plange to the other side. This was a fresh stimulus, and the knives flew fast. In a few moments, during which no one spoke, an opening sufficiently large to admit a man's head was made; then Wild Nat took the torch and thrust it through the hole, and by its light anxiously surveyed the cavity. It was a room, about fifteen feet in length, and of an oval shape. The trapper only waited to take a hasty survey of the place, and then fell to work again with renewed energy. In fifteen minutes more, under their united efforts, the hole was sufficiently large to allow them to pass through.

"We won't bother to tell Kent and the little 'un, till we see ef our molasses ain't all soap," said Wild Nat, as he crawled into the room, followed by the others. Seeing that there was an outlet to the room, the explorers did not wait to examine it, but hurried forward into the passage. It was a narrow, winding corridor, with damp, moldy walls, which terminated in a series of small caves opening one into the other by means of small openings at a little distance from the floor.

The party gave a brief glance to each successive room as they passed through, and soon reached the fifth and last one of the series. Here they found another narrow passage, differing from the other only in the fact that they appeared to be steadily ascending.

"Best tew keep party still," said Vic, in reply to some remark of Scip's; "thar's no knowin' how clos we may be t w the painted devils outside. Ef we're only fortunate enough tew— Varmints, thar's a glimmer of daylight!"

The little party hurried forward, keeping as still as possible, and soon reached the opening. A faint ray, only, of

light entered, and Vic dropped beside the hole, and placing his head as near as possible, listened attentively.

"Silent as the grave," he said, after a moment. "I guess we're quite a ways from the mouth of t'other cave."

He reached out his hand and tore away the weeds and stones that obstructed the way, and then cautiously advanced his head until he could see into the world beyond.

Twilight was settling down, but it was still light enough to enable him to see that they were much further up the hill than the entrance to the other cave, and some distance to the left of it. He could not see the Indians at the mouth of the cave, but could hear their voices. Taking a closer look of the place, he recognized it, and knew they were about a hundred yards from the other cave mouth; Deep Creek flowed tranquilly along about forty feet below him.

"We're all right," he whispered, as he drew back and Wild Nat took his place. "As soon as it's dark we'll bid adoo to this hole, an' turn toes for Fort Laramie. We'll hev tew keep powerful still, an' work our passage with shut off steam, or we'll hev a score of red devils arter us in just no time."

"Look here," said Nat, as he concluded his survey, "ye see it's gittin' dark fast. In half an hour it'll be as dark as a pocket. Tharfore ye go back an' tell Kent an' Marion, an' git reddy tew tramp, an' I'll stay here, an' purty shortly go out to the gulch whar the animals war hid, an' git them of the reds hasn't made off with 'em."

"Tain't likely the hosses is disturbed, as the reds wouldn't take 'em till they cleared the kitchen for good, an' they hain't done thet yit."

"Ye know whar that all-fired big cottonwood leans over the creek?" added Wild Nat. "Wal, steer for that as soon as it's dark. I won't be fur off. Signal, owl's hoot."

Vic nodded, and started for the first cave, followed by Scip.

CHAPTER IX.

HO-HO! AND AWAY!

THE lovers were beginning to wonder at the long absence of their friends, and both anxiously awaited their return.

"What success?" asked Wayne, eagerly, as Vic entered.

"Knives is trumps!" replied Vic, "or I'm a knave. We've found a way out, so jist pack up yer duds an' prepare to slide."

Intensely delighted they were soon ready, and in half an hour Vic thought it was dark enough to start. Accordingly they left the scene of their troubles, and threaded the damp passages and low caverns to the other entrance.

"Keep powerful still," admonished the trapper, as they neared the outside. "Don't speak after we reach the open air, an' walk mighty keerful; that's no tellin' how close the Injuns are. Varmints, but it's a dark night! So much the better for us; now keep still."

The trapper cautiously left the cave, followed by the others. When once outside Vic took the lead, and the others kept close to him, and in most profound silence they shaped their course toward the spot designated by Wild Nat.

A considerable time elapsed before they reached the looming cottonwood. Wild Nat was not there, somewhat to Vic's surprise and uneasiness, and the party quickly secreted themselves in the dense bushes near, so that, in case any straggling Indian came that way, they would be secure. Vic waited in some suspense for ten minutes, and then as the trapper was still absent, he concluded to give the signal.

Twice the long, solemn hoot of the owl rose on the air, so perfectly natural that Kent was surprised, and then, in a moment, came the answering hoot, thrice repeated, away to the left.

"All right!" said Vic; "he'll soon be here."

Ten more minutes passed, and then, clear and sweet, only a few yards distant, sounded the night-bird's note,

"Whippowill! whipp wil!" in quick succession, twice repeated.

"Keep still!" admonished Vic; "I'm goin' tow see what's wanted. 'Thet's Nat."

The trapper dropped on his hands and knees and crawled away. The trio in the thicket waited with intense solicitude for his return, but so silent was his approach, that he stood beside them before they were aware of it.

"All right!" he whispered. "He's got the hosses up here a few rods away, an' we must go to 'em. Come on."

Again in silence the little party took up the line of march, and, piloted by Vic, soon arrived at the spot, where, close to the edge of the creek, stood the trapper and the horses.

"Mount," he whispered, as they came up. "I've confabulated a Blackfoot's amble, an' as I dunno what sort of a kitten it is, I'll ride it, an' let Marion hev mine. Up with ye, little 'un!"

A moment sufficed for them all to mount, and then they started under the guidance of Wild Nat, who rode at once into the creek.

"Where ye goin'—" began Scip.

"Keep still," ordered the hunter, of ye want tow keep yer skulp. Don't splash the water so."

All advanced with as much silence as possible. The very horses seemed to use caution, and all went well. Wild Nat followed down the stream for the distance of about four miles, determined to balk their cascades if possible. No alarm was heard behind them to indicate that their absence had been discovered, and they cherished strong hopes of escaping without detection and pursuit.

At the end of four miles the trapper led the way out of the creek, taking the left bank and leading his horse in a north-east direction. Considerable care was taken for some distance to cover the trail, but when a mile from the creek, the party abandoned this precaution as no longer necessary, and increased their hitherto slow pace to a gallop.

The darkness which had thus far been dense began to show signs of lifting. The clouds rolled away and allowed the stars to shine, and the dim light thus afforded enabled

the fugitives to see their way. For several miles they continued their pace, and it was only when the cave was a good ten miles behind, that Wild Nat slackened his speed, and broke the silence which had thus far reigned undisturbed, save for his laconic directions given at intervals.

"Thar," he remarked, letting the reins fall loosely on his horse's neck, while the others imitated his example, and all subsided into a walk. "Thar, I guess we're about safe as far as *them* Injuns is concerned. I flatter myself that they don't follow us very easy. If we don't run afoul of another batch on 'em, we'll stan' a good chance of gittin' off."

"Golly!" ejaculated Scip. "I wish we could git somethin' to eat. I'm jest clean starved."

"Of course! Who ever knew a nigger that had enough?" responded Vic. "Wait till it's light. I ain't filled tew overflowing with vittals myself, and mean tew walk into a butcher-shop soon."

"How did you contrive to get the horses, Nat?" asked Kent.

"Oh, I jest went round kinder cautious, an' found they's thar whar we placed 'em, an' then I scouted round an' see'd that the reuls warn't near enough to hear, an' led 'em out. Ez I couldn't take but one at a time, it took me quite a spell, but arter I got our four out, an' safe in a thicket, I jest determined tew have another one. So I began lookin' round, an' I found the Injuns' horses out a piece from the creek, an' jest quietly took one on 'em. I reckon they'll blow *some* when they find we've gone an' took the best horse they had, but that won't disturb us in pertic'lar."

"It's rather remarkable that they hadn't found ours before this time, isn't it?" asked Kent.

"Wal, no, I dunno as 'tis," replied Nat. "Ye see, that's a plaguey neat place tew put 'em. Ye can't git in only one way, an' that's rather on t'other side from the cave. Gallinippers, but the horses war glad tew see me! Every one of 'em showed they war glad to see somebody ag'in."

"I'm all-fired mad tew think that the pesky varmints hev discovered that cave," said Vic. "It's tectotally tew bad. Now it's jest gittin' in the edge of the best trappin' time, an' tew hev them upset our plans in this way is enough tew rile anybody."

"What direction are we going?" asked Marion.

"North east," replied Wild Nat. "We'll strike the emigrant trail a little arter sunrise, ef we hev good luck."

Steadily throughout the night the little party kept on, and at sunrise reached the Sweetwater river. This they forded, and half an hour later they struck the trail, a little further down the river.

"Halt here for breakfast," said Wild Nat, stopping in the edge of the woods, and slipping the saddle off his horse.

"We're ready 'nough for it, I guess."

"Yes, but whar's the vittals?" asked Scip.

"Can't ye see them ducks yonder by the river?" asked Vic. "We'll hev some of them ef nothin' else turns up."

The whole party now dismounted. Nat proceeded to care for the animals and prepare a fire, while Vic and Kent took their rifles, and started toward the river.

Marion wandered about the edge of the grove, and plucked a few wild flowers with the dew still on their bright petals, half forgetting her hunger in her admiration of the lovely scene before her.

The sun was just up, and the cool green woods were deliciously fresh and pleasant, with the dew on the leaves and grass, while the birds burst out in trills of melody among the branches. A squirrel ran along her pathway, stopping a moment to turn his head on one side, and scan her with his little bright eyes, and then with a "clit-cr-e-e," was off among the bushes.

Over the river the flocks of ducks rose and fell, and merrily through the forest rung the echoes of the hunters' guns, showing they were not idle.

As she stood contemplating the scene, Scip loudly called her, and going to him she found him sitting on the ground, close up to the hollow end of a fallen tree, with something in his hands. He evidently was pleased, for his capacious mouth was stretched in a broad grin, showing at least twenty-four of his thirty-two glistening ivories.

"Yah, yah! Jest see here, Miss Marion."

"What is it?" asked Marion, curiously, as she approached.

"Chickens," responded Scip, holding up to view the mother partridge, and then cautiously withdrawing himself from the

log, he revealed to Marion's admiring gaze a nest full of downy chicks and one or two eggs.

"How pretty!" she exclaimed, admiringly. "But how did you catch them, Scip? I always thought they would run."

"Doy would," replied Scip, with a chuckle, "only ye see dey couldn't. As I's comin' 'long I jist see her settin' here, and grabbed her 'fore ye could wink. Den as I got ag'in' de log, why ob course de chicks couldn't git out."

"They are frightened," said Marion, touching one of the downy chicks. "Let the mother go, Scip, and come away."

"Yes," replied Scip, hesitatingly; "but I's hungry, Miss Marion."

"Nonsense! You don't want to kill the bird and let the poor little ones starve?" said Marion. "Vic and Wayne will get plenty of food. Do let her go."

Scip rose rather reluctantly and released the bird, with a longing look at her plump proportions, but getting a glimpse of the sportsmen returning with hands full of game, he followed Marion with alacrity.

"Jist look here, will ye?" said Vic, holding up to view a brace of ducks and a large goose. "Don't that look like eatin'?"

Kent followed with several more fowls, and they fell to work to prepare them for cooking. Hunger made nimble fingers, and in an incredibly short space of time half a dozen birds were impaled on sticks around the fire, soon sending forth the most appetizing odor. While the process of cooking was going forward, Vic was digging in the woods near and soon appeared with his hands full of white, fleshy looking roots, washed clean in the river, which he pronounced good to eat, and the finely browned birds being pronounced done by Wild Nat, the hungry travelers hastened to discuss them. The fowls were excellently flavored, and although in some places hardly done and guiltless of salt, our friends were not disposed to be particular, and it is doubtful if they ever ate another meal that relished so well. The old proverb says: "Hunger is the best sauce," and in this case the half-starved fugitives found it so.

"Wal, I 'low that we'd orter be movin'," said Vic, when

the repast was over. "That's no knowin' how many of our hospitable friends are arter us, an' I, for one, hed jist as lief git tew Fort Laramie 'fore they overtake us, as not."

"Count me in dar," said Seip. "I've hed enough o' *daze* for once."

The horses were caught and saddled, and once more they were moving. Vic rode a few yards in advance, and Wild Nat about the same distance in the rear. Sharp look-out was kept for enemies, but, fortunately, none were seen, and the rejoicing travelers kept on their way unmolested. It was no part of their programme to dally by the way, that the Indians might overtake them in case they were following, and they traveled steadily, only stopping two hours at noon to allow their tired horses to feed and rest. Meeting with no obstacles and encountering no foes, their progress was rapid, and sunset found them about seventy miles from Fort Laramie. Here they encamped for the night, selecting a sort of grotto in some rocks, where they would be sheltered from observation. No one felt disposed to sit up "star-gazing," and as soon as it was dark they prepared to "turn in." The most sheltered situation was chosen for Marion, and a rude couch formed by means of boughs and blankets. The men lay down beside the fire, one remaining up to keep guard, and occasionally changing with the others, that all might receive the sleep so much needed.

CHAPTER X.

AN UNWELCOME VISITOR.

MORNING came clear and pleasant, and the travelers were early astir preparing breakfast, and getting ready to resume their journey.

"Grizzly 'round not long 'go," said Vic, as he turned a huge slice of meat before the fire.

"Indeed?" exclaimed Kent. "Why do you think there was?"

"Seen his tracks," replied Vic; "fresh, too."

"I hope he is not near here now," said Marion, involuntarily, as the tales of the grizzly bear's ferocity she had heard flitted through her mind.

"Wah," said Wild Nat, "I shouldn't be s'prised ef he warn't more'n a hundred miles off. A grizzly ain't a very nice play-thin'. I could tell some yarns about 'em that would make ye open yer poppers. Taey are jist the all-firedest, meanest thing tew fight that ever ran. Take a big one an' I'd rather fight twenty Pawnees single-handed, unless I'd got the advantage of him. They're jist the ornariest critters that travels."

"Thet's a fact," said Vic. "I hev an idee thet— Varmints, thar's the ole fellow himself!"

Every man grasped his gun and turned on the defensive, as a huge grizzly bear suddenly appeared from behind the rocks and bushes on the right. Marion shrank back with a white face, and stood watching his movements breathlessly.

He was a most majestic fellow, large and ferocious in appearance, and evidently had no intention of leaving immediately. Walking up toward them he stopped a few yards distant, and raising his huge body on his hind legs, deliberately surveyed the party before him.

"Oh, de Lord," ejaculated Seip, "we's all dead men."

"Shot yer trap," growled Wild Nat. "Down on yer knees, all of ye, an' git yer knives out."

The men all dropped as directed, and as the bear slowly advanced, Wild Nat hastily removed the cap from his gun, replacing it with a fresh one. The bear advanced to within a few feet of them, licking his huge jaws, as if in anticipation of a coming feast. Kent raised his rifle to fire.

"Hold thar," exclaimed Nat; "don't fire, for yer life! Now, Vic!"

The bear was now close, and, raising himself, rushed forward with a ferocious growl. At that moment, Vic drew his attention by throwing his cap aside, and in the momentary pause Wild Nat raised his rifle and fired both barrels into the monster's eye. With a fearful roar the grizzly pitched forward and lay stretched lifeless on the ground.

"Thet war a neat little transacktion," said the trapper, coolly surveying the bear, "an' we 'scaped bein' strung tew mince-meat by it. It war a good shot."

"Why did you tell me not to fire?" asked Kent.

"Why? Beavers an' cutthroats! If ye'd fired, ye'd 'a bin dead in tew minnits. You'd have aimed at his head, an' ye might as well try tew shoot through one of them 'ere rocks as tew try tew kill a grizzly by shootin' his head. Ye can't dew it nollow. It jist maddens 'em an' then ther's lively times. I had a grizzly chase me once."

"Golly," ejaculated Scip, "I bet I'd run!"

"Humph," said Wild Nat, contemptuously, "ye might run an' be hunged. Much good it would do ye. I had a dog in them days, an' by virtew of his superior power as an animal, I managed tew subvert the critter. He war a powerful animal, that dog war. He'd run a little the fastest of any thin' out. Lay to: this meat's done."

"What sort of a dog?" asked Scip, as he obeyed the trapper's orders.

"Hound," replied Nat; "he'd ketch a live deer in forty rods when the deer had ten rods the start. Howsomever," added the trapper, "ther war one disadvantage about him. He'd git tired. After a run of ten miles he war clean tired out. But, he would go like lightnin'. Take it on open ground an' he couldn't well be beat. It's dangerous runnin' dogs in the woods. Bill Stevens had a splendid hound that would jist measure sile tew beat all. When that critter got a goin' it war hard tellin' what he war, for all ye could see war a streak, an' I've seen a streak ahind that dog twenty yards long, he went so fast; 'peared like he spread over that distance like a komit's tail, ye know. But his speed war the 'casion of a great catastrophe to him. Howsomever, it war a gain in the long run."

"What was it?" asked Kent, humphing, as the trapper paused to help himself to another piece of meat.

"It happened in this way. We war out huntin' one day, an' got arter a deer. It war in the woods, an' the dog got his eye on the game an' war jist strackin' it over the ground, an' bein' so engaged he didn't notice whar he war goin' an' so happened tew run ag'in a tree an' split him clean in two, lengthways. Bill jist run up an' grabbed up the pieces, an' clapped 'em together, an' the dog started on. As he started, Bill see'd the mistake he'd made, but it war too late then. In his hurry

he'd clapped the dorg together so two legs war up an' two down, an' though he felt sorry at the time, he see in a short time that it war a great advantage, for when two of his legs got thro' the dorg jist whapped over on t'other two, an' kep' on same as ever."

Shouts of laughter greeted the recital of this extraordinary occurrence, but the trapper never relaxed his grave aspect, standing with the utmost gravity amid the peals of laughter which convulsed the remainder of the company, apparently unconscious that he had said any thing particularly funny or incredible.

"See here, Nat," said Wayne, as Vic proceeded to cut off some portions of the bear-meat, "why did you order us to drop on our knees before you fired?"

"For this," said the trapper. "I warn't sure how the beast would act. That's the Injin way of doin'. All git on their knees, an' when the grizzly comes up one of 'em tackles him, an' that draws his attention, an' then the others pile on tew him, an' he's generally dispatched 'thout any one gittin' seriously hurt. It's all the way ye kin do when ye don't hev guns, or a chance to use 'em ef ye do hev 'em."

"Exactly," replied Kent. "I understand now, but it strikes me I shouldn't like to have a battle with one every day."

"No more should I. But it's 'bout time we war on the move, I reckon. It's gittin' late," said Vic, rising to his feet.

"That's so," exclaimed Wild Nat; "so let's tew hoss. Come on, Kent."

Ten minutes later they were on their way.

It was a beautiful day, with an unusually clear atmosphere, and the tops of the distant mountains shone blue through the haze. Their way lay through a pleasant country, and, as they were gradually leaving the regions of the mountains, the timber increased in plenty and variety. Toward morning they came in view of Laramie Peak, while far to the south-east rose the dark summits of the Black Hills.

"How far distant is Fort Laramie?" asked Marion, as she gazed through the blue distance toward the hills.

"'Bout twenty miles," replied Vic. "We hain't made a

very big journey to-day. Got started too late. However, we'll git thar in purty good season to-morrow."

"Gallinippers!" ejaculated Wild Nat, suddenly, in a suppressed tone. "Thar's Injuns!"

"Where?" was the simultaneous question from the trapper party.

"Thar!" replied Wild Nat, pointing toward the north-west with his right hand.

Four pair of eyes scanned the horizon in the direction indicated, but two only saw what they sought. Vic, sharper sighted than the others, at once detected the enemy.

"Where are they, Vic?" queried Marica, shading her eyes with her hand, and gazing earnestly away toward the point indicated. "I can see nothing."

"Look here," said Vic. "Ye see that hill 'way yonder? Well, just to the left of that ye can see—if yer eyes are sharp—a lot of leetle dark movin' objects. 'Them's 'em."

"Oh, yes! But how far distant they are. Mere specks on the horizon," said the fair girl, as she watched them.

"Humph! It won't take 'em long to git nearer," said Vic, "but as we're party due to the fort I don't fret very much. They hain't seen us; we are a small party, ye know. Move on!"

The march was resumed and they were soon out of sight of their dreaded enemy. Sunset found them about twelve miles from the fort, when they concluded to pass the night, as their animals gave evidence of considerable fatigue. They had not allowed them much time to feed or rest since morning, and a good camping spot being found, they prepared for the night's repose. The spot selected was in a small clump of timber, through which ran a clear, pebbly brook. A fire was kindled beside a fallen trunk, some meat for supper roasted, and then the little camp relapsed into slumber.

CHAPTER XI.

THE LAST OF EARTH.

It was near morning when Kent was awakened by a hand on his shoulder and a gentle shake

Starting up, half asleep, he asked in a whisper :

"What is wanting?"

"Git up," was the reply, in the well-known voice of Nathan Rogers. "*Thar's Injuns close at hand, an' we can only save ourselves by slidin' !*"

Wide enough awake now, the young man rose to his feet, and saw that Vic stood near, with the horses ready saddled.

"How close are they?" he asked.

"Not forty rods off," was the startling reply, "an' we've got to be off at once."

Stepping along a few feet to where Marion lay in innocent slumber, Kent stooped and touched her arm.

"Marion," he whispered, gently, "Marion, awake."

The girl moved uneasily, and the loved voice mingling with her dreams, she murmured :

"Wayne, dear Wayne. Oh, be careful ! They will kill you if they discover you. Have a care !"

"Poor child," murmured her lover, "even her dreams are haunted by the thought of our foes. Marion," he added, louder, "awake."

She started up in affright, and collecting her scattered senses, asked what was wanted.

"We are forced to continue our journey," answered Kent : "the Indians are near enough to render our presence here dangerous."

She sprung to her feet, frightened but calm.

"Wayne," she said, steadily, "you do not tell me all. I am not afraid. How near are they?"

"Forty or fifty rods," was the answer. "We must make haste. Are you ready?"

"Yes."

He assisted her to mount, the other three men being already in the saddle, and then springing to his seat, they were off.

It was dark—so dark that they were in some danger of encountering foes, or making some noise that might betray them; but, the dexterity of the old trapper carried them safely to the edge of the plain, where they halted a moment to make sure of their bearings.

"All right, this way," said Wild Nat, in a suppressed voice, as he led the way in the darkness. "Keep powerful still."

Fortunately, the trapper's experience and knowledge of woodcraft enabled them to avoid the Indians, who were lurking on the opposite side of the timber, unaware, as yet, of the proximity of the whites.

Silently the little band, led by Wild Nat, kept on in the darkness, and were soon two miles distant from the grove, and under the shelter of some low hills and timber. The east was beginning to grow light, and morning would soon be there. They kept on at a sharp trot for a few miles, the darkness slowly lifting till the eastern horizon was bathed in rosy light, and the last shadows of the night vanished in the west.

A desultory conversation was maintained by the rest, in which Wild Nat did not join. He appeared unusually grave and preoccupied. Marion watched him furtively, and at length thinking his grave demeanor caused by apprehensions of danger from the Indians, she spoke to him.

"What is it, Nathan? Is there great danger?"

"No, guess not," he replied, absently. Then rousing himself to consider her question, he continued: "Probably they'd find our trail, but I guess we'll be near enough the fort to distance 'em. Shan't worry, anyway."

An animated discussion of the probabilities of their being pursued sprung up, while the trapper relapsed into his former gravity and silence.

Mile after mile detached itself from the distance, and stretched itself away behind them, until only a few remained between them and their destination, when, suddenly, a long shout reached them, and looking back they beheld a slight

eminence about half a mile distant, covered with a war-party of Indians.

"We're in for it," muttered Wild Nat. "Forrard all!"

The fugitives quickened their pace at once, and whooping and yelling the Indians followed, and the race was fairly begun. Our friends felt but little anxiety, as their horses were comparatively fresh, and the distance to Fort Laramie so short, but a race with Indians, even under the most auspicious circumstances, can not fail to be exciting.

For a time the two parties maintained their relative positions, and then the Indians began to gain slowly. Already the fugitives felt comparatively safe, so near were they to their destination, and the knowledge of this fact served to stimulate their pursuers with renewed energy. On they flew, their horses straining every nerve, their battle-axes and war-spears glittering in the sun, and a deafening roar of whoops filling the air.

"That's lovely music," remarked Vic, with a grin, "and that's the akompanymment," he added, as a shower of arrows flew around them. "Tain't no use now dodging, after they've gone past," as Scip made frantic efforts to elude the flying arrows. "We'll be out of danger in a few minits. See, that's the fort!"

Amid a shower of death-winged missiles the little band of fugitives flew on, up the little rise that led to the fort, closely followed by their pursuers, who were evidently determined to abandon their purpose only when forced to do so. Occasionally a bullet, from a rifle in the hands of the savages, whizzed through the air with its peculiar whistling music, losing itself in the space beyond.

Suddenly Kent, who was near Wild Nat, observed a deadly pallor overspread the trapper's face, and saw him reel in his seat. With a presentiment of danger, the young man caught the falling man and supported him, until in an instant they were all safe within the walls of the fort.

Vic caught sight of him and hurried to him.

They laid him down carefully, Marion holding his head, and bathing his brow with water.

He opened his eyes with a faint smile.

"It's all over," he said, looking up. "Vic, my boy, we'll

go trapping together no more. I've hunted my last buffalo. Good-by."

Vic grasped his hand and wrung it without a word, turning away to hide his emotion.

The old trapper looked from one to the other.

"Good-by boys, I'm going! Good-by, little 'un; don't forget me. Don't cry, it's best so. We'll meet ag'in, I hope."

He closed his eyes with a smile, holding one of Marion's hands in his. The pallor deepened on his rough face, the labored breathing grew fainter.

"He is asleep," said Marion, reverently, with fast-dropping tears. "Asleep forever in this life."

Kent was kneeling beside him, holding one hand.

"Yes, he's gone," he said, in a low tone, rising to his feet. "The bullet passed near his heart."

Marion disengaged her hand from the tight clasp of the trapper, and with earnest sorrow for the life gone so suddenly, withdrew from the room.

Vic came up, brushing his rough hand across his eyes, as if ashamed of his emotion.

"He is gone," he said, with a glance at his peaceful face, "an' a braver man never lived."

The baffled Indians had withdrawn, fearing pursuit by the garrison.

Much to the surprise and pleasure of the party, they found at the fort a party from the Willamette River Mission, on their way to the States, with whom they might travel in company.

They remained at Fort Laramie over one day. Wild Nat was buried near the fort, and a rude slab to mark the place was erected by Kent and Vic. It was with sincere grief that they mourned the rough but kindly friend who had been with them through so many perils, and gave his life for their safety.

CHAPTER XII.

CONCLUSION.

PASS over two years, and come with me to a beautiful country-place, a short distance from Cincinnati, Ohio.

In the midst of a lovely garden stands a fine white house, whose shady piazza is overrun with climbing roses and scarlet creepers. Large trees throw their cool shadows over the roof and furnish homes for numberless birds.

The front door is open, and a dark-eyed woman, young and fair, is sewing by the window. At a little distance from her is a white-robed baby playing on the floor, to which her eyes wander with a tender glance.

There is a step on the piazza; a manly form darkens the door; a cheery voice chirps to the laughing baby, and the mother looks up with a smile. It is our old friends, Marion Verne, now Marion Kent, and Wayne. This beautiful country-place is their home, and a happier family it would be hard to find.

"Marion," said Wayne, as he tossed the crowing child, "do you know what day this is?"

"No—yes—it is Wednesday, the seventeenth of September, I believe."

"Yes; but do you remember that this is the second anniversary of Wild Nat's death?"

Marion looked up with a graver face.

"Two years have brought their changes, Wayne. I wonder where Vic is?"

"Trapping beavers and fighting Indians I dare say. I wonder— Ah, there is company."

Marion turned to look from the window.

A man mounted on a large grey horse had ridden up to the gate and dismounted. As he stepped from behind a clump of lilac bushes, Mrs. Kent started up with an exclamation:

"Why, Wayne—it is—yes, it is Vic Potter!"

Wayne started toward the door, meeting the trapper at the threshold.

"Welcome, old friend!" he said, heartily. "Welcome!"

There was a hearty greeting and hand-shaking all round, as he entered.

"I'm powerful glad tew see ye," he exclaimed, as he took a seat. "I got a notion thet mebbe ye'd like tew see Vic's only pictur' ap'ha, so I jist extended my travels a little, an' here I be! Is this here youngster yours, Marion?"

"Yes," was the smiling reply, as the trapper took the little fellow from his father's arms. "And what do you think it's name is, Vic?"

"Hain't no idee," said the trapper, reflectively. "Wayne, mebbe, arter its father."

"No," said Marion, "we have named him Victor."

The old hunter looked up with a delighted grin.

"Did ye now? Wal, thet's suthin' I didn't expect. He's a fine little fellow, an' I 'spect tew have the pleasure of farn-in' him how tew trap beavers one of these days."

At this moment the dining-room door opened, and a shining black tree looked in. "We have no difficulty in recognizing it as belonging to Scip,"

"Gorry m'ity! Is dat ar' you, Vic?" he ejaculated, as his eyes fell on the trapper. "He! he! I wasn't 'spectin' to see you."

"Nor I you," answered Vic, as he shook hands. "What ye doin' here?"

"Oh, Miss Marion, she keeps me about de kitchen. 'Spect I'm good to scour knives," answered Scip, with a broad grin.

"Indeed, he is invaluable," said Marion, as she led the way out to dinner. "I couldn't do without him."

"You are not going back very soon, are you?" asked Wayne, when they were seated at the table.

"Next week," replied Vic. "I can't stand it 'mong civilization very long. I'm only to hunt on the plains. It's lonesome tho'," he added, in a changed tone, "'thout Nat."

"Poor fellow," said Wayne. "He at least had the privilege of dying with friends around him, though an Indian bullet laid him low."

"He war a good fellow," said Vic; "thar war none better nor braver."

"Nor one more kindly," said Marion. "He was a rough diamond but a true one. I mourned him as a friend."

Thus was the trapper, whose lonely grave in the wilds of the Far West might move the wonder of some chance passer-by, remembered.

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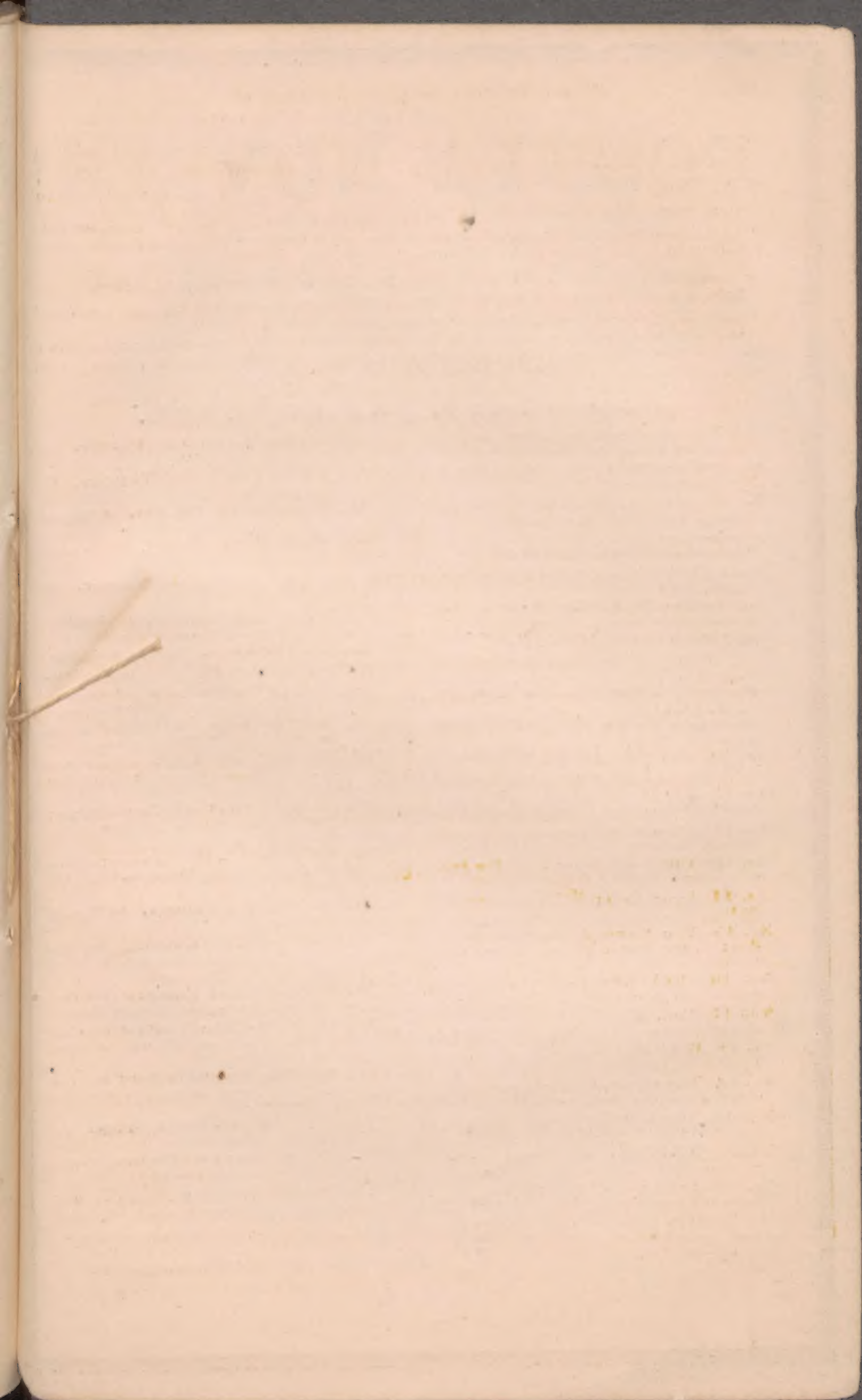
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